PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 434 (Part 1)

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2005–06

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Alphabetical List of Members

[Returned at the General Election, 5 May 2005]

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Ainger, Nicholas Richard (Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire)
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Atkinson, Peter Landreth (Hexham)
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Austin, John Eric (Erith and Thamesmead)

B

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Baird, Vera (Redcar)
Baker, Norman John (Lewes)
Baldry, Antony Brian (Banbury)
Balls, Edward Michael (Normanton)
Banks, Gordon Raymond (Ochil and South Perthshire)
Barker, Gregory Leonard George (Bexhill and Battle)
Barlow, Celia Anne (Hove)
Baron, John Charles (Billericay)
Barrett, John Andrew (Edinburgh, West)
Barron, Rt. Hon. Kevin John (Rother Valley)
Battle, Rt. Hon. John Dominic (Leeds, West)
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Benyon, Richard Henry Ronald (Newbury)
Bercow, John Simon (Buckingham)
Beresford, Sir Alexander Paul (Mole Valley)
Berry, Roger Leslie (Kingswood)
Betts, Clive James Charles (Sheffield, Attercliffe)
Binley, Brian Arthur Roland (Northampton, South)
Blackman, Elizabeth Marion (Erewash)
Blackman-Woods, Roberta Carol (City of Durham)
Blair, Rt. Hon. Anthony Charles Lynton (Sedgefield)
Blears, Hazel Anne (Salford)
Blizzard, Robert John (Waveney)
Blunkett, Rt. Hon. David (Sheffield, Brightside)
Blunt, Crispin Jeremy Rupert (Reigate)
Bone, Peter William (Wellingborough)
Borrow, David Stanley (South Ribble)
Boswell, Timothy Eric (Daventry)
Bottomley, Peter James (Worthing, West)
Bradshaw, Benjamin Peter James (Exeter)
Brady, Graham Stuart (Altrincham and Sale, West)
Brake, Thomas Anthony (Carshalton and Wallington)
Brazier, Julian William Hendy (Canterbury)
Breed, Colin Edward (South-East Cornwall)
Brennan, Kevin Denis (Cardiff, West)
Brokenshire, James Peter (Hornchurch)
Brooke, Annette Lesley (Mid-Dorset and North Poole)
Brown, Lyn Carol (West Ham)
Brown, Rt. Hon. James Gordon (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath)
Brown, Rt. Hon. Nicholas Hugh (Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend)
Brown, Russell Leslie (Dumfries and Galloway)
Browne, Desmond Henry (Kilmarnock and Loudon)
Browne, Jeremy Richard (Taunton)
Browning, Angela Frances (Tiverton and Honiton)
Bruce, Malcolm Gray (Gordon)
Bryant, Christopher John (Rhondda)
Buck, Karen Patricia (Regent's Park and Kensington, North)
Burden, Richard Haines (Birmingham, Northfield)
Burgon, Colin (Elmet)
Burnham, Andrew Murray (Leigh)
Burns, Simon Hugh McGuigan (West Chelmsford)
Burrowes, David John Barrington (Enfield, Southgate)
Burstow, Paul Kenneth (Sutton and Cheam)
Burt, Alistair James Hendrie (North-East Bedfordshire)
Burt, Lorely Jane (Solihull)
Butler, Dawn Petula (Brent, South)
Butterfill, Sir John Valentine (Bournemouth, West)
Byers, Rt. Hon. Stephen John (North Tyneside)
Byrne, Liam Dominic (Birmingham, Hodge Hill)

C

Cable, John Vincent (Twickenham)
Caborn, Rt. Hon. Richard George (Sheffield, Central)
Cairns, John David (Inverclyde)
Calton, Patsy (Cheadle)
Cameron, David William Donald (Witney)
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Campbell, Gregory Lloyd (East Londonderry)
Campbell, Ronald (Blyth Valley)
Campbell, Rt. Hon. Sir Walter Menzies (North-East Fife)
Carmichael, Alexander Morrison (Orkney and Shetland)
Carswell, John Douglas Wilson (Harwich)
Cash, William Nigel Paul (Stone)
Caton, Martin Phillip (Gower)
Cawsey, Ian Arthur (Brigg and Goole)
Challen, Colin Robert (Morley and Rothwell)
Chapman, James Keith (Wirral, South)
Chaytor, David Michael (Bury, North)
Chope, Christopher Robert (Christchurch)
Clapham, Michael (Barnsley, West and Penistone)

Clappison, William James (Hertsmere)
Clark, Gregory David (Tunbridge Wells)
Clark, Katy (North Ayrshire and Arran)
Clark, Paul Gordon (Gillingham)
Clarke, Rt. Hon. Charles Rodway (Norwich, South)
Clarke, Rt. Hon. Kenneth Harry (Rushcliffe)
Clarke, Rt. Hon. Thomas (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)
Clegg, Nicholas William Peter (Sheffield, Hallam)
Clelland, David Gordon (Tyne Bridge)
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey (Cotswold)
Clwyd, Rt. Hon. Ann (Cynon Valley)
Coaker, Vernon Rodney (Gedling)
Coffey, Ann (Stockport)
Cohen, Harry Michael (Leyton and Wanstead)
Connarty, Michael (Linlithgow and East Falkirk)
Conway, Derek Leslie (Old Bexley and Sidcup)
Cook, Francis (Stockton, North)
Cook, Rt. Hon. Robin (Livingston)
Cooper, Rosemary Elizabeth (West Lancashire)
Cooper, Yvette (Pontefract and Castleford)
Corbyn, Jeremy Bernard (Islington, North)
Cousins, James MacKay (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central)
Cox, Charles Geoffrey (Torridge and West Devon)
Crabb, Stephen (Preseli Pembrokeshire)
Crausby, David Anthony (Bolton, North-East)
Creagh, Mary Helen (Wakefield)
Cruddas, Jonathon (Dagenham)
Cryer, Constance Ann (Keighley)
Cummings, John Scott (Easington)
Cunningham, James Dolan (Coventry, South)
Cunningham, Thomas Anthony (Workington)
Curry, Rt. Hon. David Maurice (Skipton and Ripon)
Curtis-Thomas, Claire (Crosby)

D

Darling, Rt. Hon. Alistair Maclean (Edinburgh, South-West)
Davey, Edward Jonathon (Kingston and Surbiton)
David, Wayne (Caerphilly)
Davidson, Ian Graham (Glasgow, South-West)
Davies, David Thomas Charles (Monmouth)
Davies, John Quentin (Grantham and Stamford)
Davies, Philip Andrew (Shipley)
Davis, Rt. Hon. David Michael (Haltemprice and Howden)
Dean, Janet Elizabeth Ann (Burton)
Denham, Rt. Hon. John Yorke (Southampton, Itchen)
Dhanda, Parmjit Singh (Gloucester)
Dismore, Andrew Hartley (Hendon)
Djanogly, Jonathan Simon (Huntingdon)
Dobbin, James (Heywood and Middleton)
Dobson, Rt. Hon. Frank Gordon (Holborn and St. Pancras)
Dodds, Nigel Alexander (Belfast, North)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)
Donaldson, Jeffrey Mark (Lagan Valley)
Donohoe, Brian Harold (Central Ayrshire)
Doran, Frank (Aberdeen, North)
Dorrell, Rt. Hon. Stephen James (Charnwood)
Dorries, Nadine Vanessa (Mid-Bedfordshire)
Dowd, James Patrick (Lewisham, West)
Drew, David Elliott (Stroud)
Duddridge, James Philip (Rochford and Southend, East)
Duncan, Alan James Carter (Rutland and Melton)
Duncan Smith, Rt. Hon. George Iain (Chingford and Woodford Green)
Dunne, Philip Martin (Ludlow)
Dunwoody, Gwyneth Patricia (Crewe and Nantwich)
Durkan, John Mark (Foyle)

E

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eagle, Maria (Liverpool, Garston)
Efford, Clive Stanley (Eltham)
Ellman, Louise Joyce (Liverpool, Riverside)
Ellwood, Tobias Martin (Bournemouth, East)
Engel, Natascha (North-East Derbyshire)
Ennis, Jeffrey (Barnsley, East and Mexborough)
Etherington, William (Sunderland, North)
Evans, Nigel Martin (Ribble Valley)
Evennett, David Anthony (Bexleyheath and Crayford)

F

Fabricant, Michael Louis David (Lichfield)
Fallon, Michael Cathel (Sevenoaks)
Farrelly, Christopher Paul (Newcastle-under-Lyme)
Farron, Timothy James (Westmorland and Lonsdale)
Featherstone, Lynne Choona (Hornsey and Wood Green)
Field, Rt. Hon. Frank (Birkenhead)
Field, Mark Christopher (Cities of London and Westminster)
Fisher, Mark (Stoke-on-Trent, Central)
Fitzpatrick, James (Poplar and Canning Town)
Flello, Robert Charles Douglas (Stoke-on-Trent, South)
Flint, Caroline Louise (Don Valley)
Flynn, Paul Phillip (Newport West)
Follett, Daphne Barbara (Stevenage)
Forth, Rt. Hon. Eric (Bromley and Chislehurst)
Foster, Donald Michael Ellison (Bath)
Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings and Rye)
Foster, Michael John (Worcester)
Fox, Liam (Woodspring)
Francis, David Hywel (Aberavon)
Francois, Mark Gino (Rayleigh)
Fraser, Christopher James (South-West Norfolk)

G

Gale, Roger James (North Thanet)
Galloway, George (Bethnal Green and Bow)
Gapes, Michael John (Ilford, South)
Gardiner, Barry Strachan (Brent, North)
Garnier, Edward Henry (Harborough)
Gauke, David Michael (South-West Hertfordshire)
George, Andrew Henry (St. Ives)
George, Rt. Hon. Bruce Thomas (Walsall, South)
Gerrard, Neil Francis (Walthamstow)
Gibb, Nicolas John (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton)
Gibson, Ian (Norwich, North)
Gidley, Sandra Julia (Romsey)
Gildernew, Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gillan, Cheryl Elise Kendall (Chesham and Amersham)
Gilroy, Linda (Plymouth, Sutton)
Godsiff, Roger Duncan (Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath)
Goggins, Paul Gerard (Wythenshawe and Sale, East)
Goldsworthy, Julia Anne (Falmouth and Camborne)
Goodman, Helen Catherine (Bishop Auckland)
Goodman, Paul Alexander Cyril (Wycombe)
Goodwill, Robert (Scarborough and Whitby)
Gove, Michael Andrew (Surrey Heath)
Gray, James Whiteside (North Wiltshire)
Grayling, Christopher Stephen (Epsom and Ewell)
Green, Damian Howard (Ashford)
Greening, Justine (Putney)
Greenway, John Robert (Ryedale)

Grieve, Dominic Charles Roberts (Beaconsfield)
Griffith, Nia Rhiannon (Llanelli)
Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh, South)
Grogan, John Timothy (Selby)
Gummer, Rt. Hon. John Selwyn (Suffolk Coastal)
Gwynne, Andrew John (Denton and Reddish)

H

Hague, Rt. Hon. William Jefferson (Richmond, Yorks)
Hain, Rt. Hon. Peter Gerald (Neath)
Hall, Michael Thomas (Weaver Vale)
Hall, Patrick (Bedford)
Hamilton, David (Midlothian)
Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds, North-East)
Hammond, Philip (Runnymede and Weybridge)
Hammond, Stephen William (Wimbledon)
Hancock, Michael Thomas (Portsmouth, South)
Hands, Gregory William (Hammersmith and Fulham)
Hanson, David George (Delyn)
Harman, Rt. Hon. Harriet (Camberwell and Peckham)
Harper, Mark James (Forest of Dean)
Harris, Evan Leslie (Oxford, West and Abingdon)
Harris, Tom (Glasgow, South)
Harvey, Nicholas Barton (North Devon)
Haselhurst, Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough (Saffron Walden)
Havard, David Stewart (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney)
Hayes, John Henry (South Holland and The Deepings)
Heal, Sylvia Lloyd (Halesowen and Rowley Regis)
Heald, Oliver (North-East Hertfordshire)
Healey, John (Wentworth)
Heath, David William St. John (Somerton and Frome)
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt. Hon. David Philip (Wells)
Hemming, John Alexander Melvin (Birmingham, Yardley)
Henderson, Douglas John (Newcastle upon Tyne, North)
Hendrick, Mark Phillip (Preston)
Hendry, Charles (Wealden)
Hepburn, Stephen (Jarrow)
Heppell, John (Nottingham, East)
Herbert, Nicholas Le Quesne (Arundel and South Downs)
Hermon, Sylvia Eileen, Lady (North Down)
Hesford, Stephen (Wirral, West)
Hewitt, Rt. Hon. Patricia Hope (Leicester, West)
Heyes, David Alan (Ashton-under-Lyne)
Hill, Rt. Hon. Keith (Streatham)
Hillier, Meg (Hackney, South and Shoreditch)
Hoban, Mark Gerard (Fareham)
Hodge, Rt. Hon. Margaret Eve (Barking)
Hodgson, Sharon (Gateshead, East and Washington, West)
Hoey, Catharine Letitia (Vauxhall)
Hogg, Rt. Hon. Douglas Martin (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
Hollobone, Philip Thomas (Kettering)
Holloway, Adam James Harold (Gravesham)
Holmes, Paul Robert (Chesterfield)
Hood, James (Lanark and Hamilton, East)
Hoon, Rt. Hon. Geoffrey William (Ashfield)
Hope, Philip Ian (Corby)
Hopkins, Kelvin Peter (Luton, North)
Horam, John Rhodes (Orpington)
Horwood, Martin Charles (Cheltenham)
Hosie, Stewart (Dundee, East)
Howard, Rt. Hon. Michael (Folkestone and Hythe)
Howarth, David Ross (Cambridge)
Howarth, George Edward (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East)
Howarth, James Gerald Douglas (Aldershot)
Howells, Kim Scott (Pontypridd)
Hoyle, Lindsay Harvey (Chorley)
Hughes, Rt. Hon. Beverley June (Stretford and Urmston)
Hughes, Simon Henry Ward (North Southwark and Bermondsey)
Huhne, Christopher Murray Paul (Eastleigh)
Humble, Jovanka Joan (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood)
Hunt, Jeremy (South-West Surrey)
Hurd, Nicholas Richard (Ruislip-Northwood)
Hutton, Rt. Hon. John Matthew Patrick (Barrow and Furness)

I

Iddon, Brian (Bolton, South-East)
Illsley, Eric Evlyn (Barnsley, Central)
Ingram, Rt. Hon. Adam (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow)
Irranca-Davies, Ifor Huw (Ogmore)

J

Jack, Rt. Hon. John Michael (Fylde)
Jackson, Glenda May (Hampstead and Highgate)
Jackson, Stewart James (Peterborough)
James, Siân Catherine (Swansea, East)
Jenkin, Bernard Christison (North Essex)
Jenkins, Brian David (Tamworth)
Johnson, Rt. Hon. Alan Arthur (Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle)
Johnson, Alexander Boris (Henley)
Johnson, Diana Ruth (Kingston upon Hull, North)
Jones, David Ian (Clwyd, West)
Jones, Helen Mary (Warrington, North)
Jones, Kevan David (North Durham)
Jones, Lynne Mary (Birmingham, Selly Oak)
Jones, Martyn David (Clwyd, South)
Jowell, Rt. Hon. Tessa Jane (Dulwich and West Norwood)
Joyce, Eric (Falkirk)

K

Kaufman, Rt. Hon. Sir Gerald Bernard (Manchester, Gorton)
Kawczynski, Daniel Robert (Shrewsbury and Atcham)
Keeble, Sally Curtis (Northampton, North)
Keeley, Barbara Mary (Worsley)
Keen, Alan (Feltham and Heston)
Keen, Ann Lloyd (Brentford and Isleworth)
Keetch, Paul Stuart (Hereford)
Kelly, Rt. Hon. Ruth Maria (Bolton, West)
Kemp, Fraser (Houghton and Washington, East)
Kennedy, Rt. Hon. Charles Peter (Ross, Skye and Lochaber)
Kennedy, Rt. Hon. Jane Elizabeth (Liverpool, Wavertree)
Key, Simon Robert (Salisbury)
Khabra, Piara Singh (Ealing, Southall)
Khan, Sadiq Aman (Tooting)
Kidney, David Neil (Stafford)
Kilfoyle, Peter (Liverpool, Walton)
Kirkbride, Julie (Bromsgrove)
Knight, Rt. Hon. Gregory (East Yorkshire)
Knight, Jim (South Dorset)
Kramer, Susan Veronica (Richmond Park)
Kumar, Ashok (Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland)

L

Ladyman, Stephen John (South Thanet)
Laing, Eleanor Fulton (Epping Forest)
Lait, Jacqueline Anne Harkness (Beckenham)
Lamb, Norman Peter (North Norfolk)
Lammy, David Lindon (Tottenham)
Lancaster, John Mark (North-East Milton Keynes)
Lansley, Andrew David (South Cambridgeshire)
Law, Peter John (Blaenau Gwent)
Laws, David Anthony (Yeovil)
Laxton, Robert (Derby, North)
Lazarowicz, Marek Jerzy (Edinburgh, North and Leith)
Leech, John (Manchester, Withington)
Leigh, Edward Julian Egerton (Gainsborough)
Lepper, David (Brighton, Pavilion)
Letwin, Rt. Hon. Oliver (West Dorset)
Levitt, Tom (High Peak)
Lewis, Ivan (Bury, South)
Lewis, Julian Murray (New Forest, East)
Liddell-Grainger, Ian Richard (Bridgwater)
Lidington, David Roy (Aylesbury)
Lilley, Rt. Hon. Peter Bruce (Hitchin and Harpenden)
Linton, Martin (Battersea)
Lloyd, Anthony Joseph (Manchester, Central)
Llwyd, Elfyn (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)
Lord, Sir Michael Nicholson (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)
Loughton, Timothy Paul (East Worthing and Shoreham)
Love, Andrew Mcculloch (Edmonton)
Lucas, Ian Colin (Wrexham)
Luff, Peter James (Mid-Worcestershire)

M

McAvoy, Rt. Hon. Thomas McLaughlin (Rutherglen and Hamilton, West)
McCabe, Stephen James (Birmingham, Hall Green)
McCafferty, Christine (Calder Valley)
McCarthy, Kerry (Bristol, East)
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah Louise (Portsmouth, North)
McCartney, Rt. Hon. Ian (Makerfield)
McCrea, The Reverend Robert Thomas William (South Antrim)
McDonagh, Siobhain Ann (Mitcham and Morden)
McDonnell, Alasdair (Belfast, South)
McDonnell, John Martin (Hayes and Harlington)
MacDougall, John William (Glenrothes)
McFadden, Patrick Bosco (Wolverhampton, South-East)
McFall, Rt. Hon. John (West Dunbartonshire)
McGovern, James (Dundee, West)
McGrady, Eddie (South Down)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid-Ulster)
McGuire, Anne (Stirling)
McIntosh, Anne Caroline Ballingall (Vale of York)
McIsaac, Shona (Cleethorpes)
Mackay, Rt. Hon. Andrew James (Bracknell)
McKechin, Ann (Glasgow, North)
McKenna, Rosemary (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch, East)
Mackinlay, Andrew (Thurrock)
Maclean, Rt. Hon. David John (Penrith and The Border)
McLoughlin, Patrick Allen (West Derbyshire)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar)
McNulty, Anthony James (Harrow, East)
MacShane, Denis (Rotherham)
Mactaggart, Fiona Margaret (Slough)
Mahmood, Khalid (Birmingham, Perry Barr)
Main, Anne Margaret (St. Albans)
Malik, Shahid (Dewsbury)
Malins, Humfrey Jonathan (Woking)
Mallaber, Judy (Amber Valley)
Mann, John (Bassetlaw)
Maples, John Cradock (Stratford-on-Avon)
Marris, Robert Howard (Wolverhampton, South-West)
Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool, South)
Marshall, David (Glasgow, East)
Marshall-Andrews, Robert Graham (Medway)
Martin, Rt. Hon. Michael John (Glasgow, North-East)
Martlew, Eric Anthony (Carlisle)
Mates, Rt. Hon. Michael John (East Hampshire)
Maude, Rt. Hon. Francis Anthony Aylmer (Horsham)
May, Rt. Hon. Theresa Mary (Maidenhead)
Meacher, Rt. Hon. Michael Hugh (Oldham, West and Royton)
Meale, Joseph Alan (Mansfield)
Mercer, Patrick John (Newark)
Merron, Gillian Joanna (Lincoln)
Michael, Rt. Hon. Alun Edward (Cardiff, South and Penarth)
Milburn, Rt. Hon. Alan (Darlington)
Miliband, David Wright (South Shields)
Miliband, Edward Samuel (Doncaster, North)
Miller, Andrew Peter (Ellesmere Port and Neston)
Miller, Maria Frances Lewis (Basingstoke)
Milton, Anne Frances (Guildford)
Mitchell, Andrew John Bower (Sutton Coldfield)
Mitchell, Austin Vernon (Great Grimsby)
Moffatt, Laura Jean (Crawley)
Mole, Christopher David (Ipswich)
Moon, Madeleine (Bridgend)
Moore, Michael Kevin (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk)
Moran, Margaret (Luton, South)
Morden, Jessica Elizabeth (Newport, East)
Morgan, Julie (Cardiff, North)
Morley, Elliot Anthony (Scunthorpe)
Moss, Malcolm Douglas (North-East Cambridgeshire)
Mountford, Kali Carol Jean (Colne Valley)
Mudie, George Edward (Leeds, East)
Mulholland, Gregory Thomas (Leeds, North-West)
Mullin, Christopher John (Sunderland, South)
Mundell, David Gordon (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale)
Munn, Margaret Patricia (Sheffield, Heeley)
Murphy, Conor Terence (Newry and Armagh)
Murphy, Denis (Wansbeck)
Murphy, Jim (East Renfrewshire)
Murphy, Rt. Hon. Paul Peter (Torfaen)
Murrison, Andrew William (Westbury)

N

Naysmith, John Douglas (Bristol, North-West)
Newmark, Brooks (Braintree)
Norris, Dan (Wansdyke)

O

O'Brien, Michael (North Warwickshire)
O'Brien, Stephen Rothwell (Eddisbury)
O'Hara, Edward (Knowsley, South)
Oaten, Mark (Winchester)
Olner, William John (Nuneaton)
Öpik, Lembit (Montgomeryshire)

Osborne, George Gideon Oliver (Tatton)
Osborne, Sandra (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock)
Ottaway, Richard Geoffrey James (Croydon, South)
Owen, Albert (Ynys Môn)

P

Paice, James Edward Thornton (South-East Cambridgeshire)
Paisley, The Reverend Ian Richard Kyle (North Antrim)
Palmer, Nicholas Douglas (Broxtowe)
Paterson, Owen William (North Shropshire)
Pearson, Ian Phares (Dudley, South)
Pelling, Andrew John (Croydon, Central)
Penning, Michael Alan (Hemel Hempstead)
Penrose, John David (Weston-Super-Mare)
Picking, Anne (East Lothian)
Pickles, Eric Jack (Brentwood and Ongar)
Plaskitt, James Andrew (Warwick and Leamington)
Pope, Gregory James (Hyndburn)
Pound, Stephen Pelham (Ealing, North)
Prentice, Bridget Theresa (Lewisham, East)
Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
Prescott, Rt. Hon. John Leslie (Kingston upon Hull, East)
Price, Adam (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr)
Primarolo, Rt. Hon. Dawn (Bristol, South)
Prisk, Mark (Hertford and Stortford)
Pritchard, Mark Andrew (The Wrekin)
Prosser, Gwynfor Mathews (Dover)
Pugh, John David (Southport)
Purchase, Kenneth (Wolverhampton, North-East)
Purnell, James Mark Dakin (Stalybridge and Hyde)

R

Rammell, William Ernest (Harlow)
Randall, Alexander John (Uxbridge)
Raynsford, Rt. Hon. Wyvill Richard Nicolls (Greenwich and Woolwich)
Redwood, Rt. Hon. John Alan (Wokingham)
Reed, Andrew John (Loughborough)
Reed, Jamieson Ronald (Copeland)
Reid, Alan (Argyll and Bute)
Reid, Rt. Hon. John (Airdrie and Shotts)
Rifkind, Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Leslie (Kensington and Chelsea)
Riordan, Linda (Halifax)
Robathan, Andrew Robert George (Blaby)
Robertson, Angus (Moray)
Robertson, Hugh Michael (Faversham and Mid Kent)
Robertson, John (Glasgow, North-West)
Robertson, Laurence Anthony (Tewkesbury)
Robinson, Geoffrey (Coventry, North-West)
Robinson, Iris (Strangford)
Robinson, Peter David (Belfast, East)
Rogerson, Daniel John (North Cornwall)
Rooney, Terrence Henry (Bradford, North)
Rosindell, Andrew Richard (Romford)
Rowen, Paul John (Rochdale)
Roy, Frank (Motherwell and Wishaw)
Ruane, Christopher Shaun (Vale of Clwyd)
Ruddock, Joan Mary (Lewisham, Deptford)
Ruffley, David Laurie (Bury St. Edmunds)
Russell, Christine Margaret (City of Chester)
Russell, Robert Edward (Colchester)
Ryan, Joan Marie (Enfield, North)

S

Salmond, Alex Elliot Anderson (Banff and Buchan)
Salter, Martin John (Reading, West)
Sanders, Adrian Mark (Torbay)
Sarwar, Mohammad (Glasgow, Central)
Scott, Lee (Ilford, North)
Seabeck, Alison Jane (Plymouth, Devonport)
Selous, Andrew Edmund Armstrong (South-West Bedfordshire)
Shapps, Grant V (Welwyn Hatfield)
Shaw, Jonathan Rowland (Chatham and Aylesford)
Sheerman, Barry John (Huddersfield)
Shepherd, Richard Charles Scrimgeour (Aldridge-Brownhills)
Sheridan, James (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North)
Short, Rt. Hon. Clare (Birmingham, Ladywood)
Simmonds, Mark Jonathan Mortlock (Boston and Skegness)
Simon, Siôn Llewelyn (Birmingham, Erdington)
Simpson, Alan John (Nottingham, South)
Simpson, David (Upper Bann)
Simpson, Keith Robert (Mid-Norfolk)
Singh, Marsha (Bradford, West)
Skinner, Dennis Edward (Bolsover)
Slaughter, Andrew Francis (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush)
Smith, Rt. Hon. Andrew David (Oxford, East)
Smith, Angela Christine (Sheffield, Hillsborough)
Smith, Angela Evans (Basildon)
Smith, Geraldine (Morecambe and Lunesdale)
Smith, Rt. Hon. Jacqueline Jill (Redditch)
Smith, John William Patrick (Vale of Glamorgan)
Smith, Sir Robert (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)
Snelgrove, Anne Christine (South Swindon)
Soames, Arthur Nicholas Winston (Mid-Sussex)
Soulsby, Sir Peter Alfred (Leicester, South)
Southworth, Helen Mary (Warrington, South)
Spellar, Rt. Hon. John Francis (Warley)
Spelman, Caroline Alice (Meriden)
Spicer, Sir Michael William Hardy (West Worcestershire)
Spink, Robert Michael (Castle Point)
Spring, Richard John Grenville (West Suffolk)
Squire, Rachel Anne (Dunfermline and West Fife)
Stanley, Rt. Hon. Sir John Paul (Tonbridge and Malling)
Starkey, Phyllis Margaret (Milton Keynes, South-West)
Steen, Anthony David (Totnes)
Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
Stoate, Howard Geoffrey Alvan (Dartford)
Strang, Rt. Hon. Gavin Steel (Edinburgh, East)
Straw, Rt. Hon. John Whitaker (Blackburn)
Streeter, Gary Nicholas (South-West Devon)
Stringer, Graham Eric (Manchester, Blackley)
Stuart, Gisela Gschaider (Birmingham, Edgbaston)
Stuart, Graham Charles (Beverley and Holderness)
Stunell, Andrew (Hazel Grove)
Sutcliffe, Gerald (Bradford, South)
Swayne, Desmond Angus (New Forest, West)
Swinson, Jo (East Dunbartonshire)
Swire, Hugo (East Devon)
Syms, Robert Andrew Raymond (Poole)

T

Tami, Mark Richard (Alyn and Deeside)
Tapsell, Sir Peter Hannay Bailey (Louth and Horncastle)
Taylor, Dari Jean (Stockton, South)
Taylor, David Leslie (North-West Leicestershire)
Taylor, Ian Colin (Esher and Walton)

Taylor, Matthew Owen John (Truro and St. Austell)
Taylor, Richard Thomas (Wyre Forest)
Teather, Sarah Louise (Brent, East)
Thomas, Gareth Richard (Harrow, West)
Thornberry, Emily (Islington, South and Finsbury)
Thurso, Viscount John Archibald (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
Timms, Stephen Creswell (East Ham)
Tipping, Simon Patrick (Sherwood)
Todd, Mark Wainwright (South Derbyshire)
Touhig, James Donnelly (Islwyn)
Tredinnick, David Arthur Stephen (Bosworth)
Trickett, Jon Hedley (Hemsworth)
Truswell, Paul Anthony (Pudsey)
Turner, Andrew John (Isle of Wight)
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Turner, Neil (Wigan)
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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 11 MAY 2005]

FIFTY-FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 434**

FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 2005–2006

House of Commons

Wednesday 11 May 2005

The House met at half-past Two o'clock.

The House being met; and it being the first day of the meeting of this Parliament, pursuant to Proclamation, ROGER BLAKEMORE SANDS, *Clerk of the House of Commons,* DOUGLAS GEORGE MILLAR, *Clerk Assistant, and* HELEN ELIZABETH IRWIN, *Principal Clerk of the Table Office, attending in the House, and the other Clerks attending, according to their duty,* ALEXANDER CLAUD STUART ALLEN, *Clerk of the Crown in Chancery in Great Britain, delivered to the said* ROGER BLAKEMORE SANDS *a book containing a list of the names of the Members returned to serve in this Parliament.*

Several of the Members repaired to their seats.

MR. ALAN WILLIAMS *took the Chair, pursuant to Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker: Member presiding).*

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners.

The House went; and a Commission having been read for opening and holding the Parliament, the Lords Commissioners directed the House to proceed to the Election of a Speaker, and to present the Speaker-Elect tomorrow, in the House of Peers, for the Royal Approbation.

And the House having returned:—

Election of Speaker

2.46 pm

Alan Williams (Swansea West) (Lab): Under the provisions of Standing Order No. 1A, I am now required to ascertain whether Mr. Michael J. Martin is willing to be chosen as Speaker.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Michael J. Martin (Glasgow North East) (Ind): I hope the House will be so pleased with me after I make my speech.

Father of the House, I submit myself to the will of the House, as is the ancient custom. In doing so, I wish to congratulate you on becoming Father of the House. You were elected to this House in 1964, on the same day as my predecessor, Dick Buchanan. With your wealth of experience, I have always been impressed by the fact that Members from every side of the House listen when you speak. Because of your dedicated work with the British-American parliamentary group, you are well respected in the American Congress and in the Senate of the United States.

I would also wish the outgoing Father of the House, Tam Dalyell, a very happy retirement. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Everyone agrees. May I also convey my very best wishes to his wife Kathleen, who is a most popular person in Scotland and comes from the Wheatley family, who are a family of distinguished parliamentarians?

I would like to thank my wife, Mary, who has ensured that I have a family life here at Speaker's House. I thank her because coming to London means that she has to leave her family and friends, and especially our two grandchildren, Ryan and Abbie.

Father of the House, my constituency, up until the election, was called Glasgow, Springburn. It is now known as Glasgow, North-East, because of boundary changes. It has been expanded to take in the districts of

[Michael J. Martin]

Possilpark, Lambhill, Hamiltonhill and Milton. These changes now mean that I represent a constituency where my wife Mary was raised, and where we were married and raised our son, Paul, and daughter, Mary. I thank the people of Glasgow, North-East for the honour they have given me, and I hope I will always be worthy of their vote of confidence.

If I were asked what impressed me most about my constituency, I would say that it was the tremendous kindness of the people there. There is no law that there should be clubs for our disabled people or our elderly, and yet every day, in every district, men and women volunteer to run those clubs so that their friends and neighbours can have a better quality of life. I have at least five community-based housing associations in which residents give up their time to improve the tenements and homes of their neighbourhood. Such people come to meetings after their day's work. Each and every one of those associations have built sheltered housing so that pensioners and people with special needs can stay within the community and live in security. They also provide new buildings so that young couples can live in the districts in which they were raised. Many asylum seekers live in my constituency and I am impressed by the number of local people who come to my surgeries asking for help for their new neighbours, who, only a few months previously, had lived in another land, many thousands of miles away.

I congratulate the Members who have been re-elected. I have enjoyed working with them over the past four and a half years. I hope that I have not been too hard on them. I also pay tribute to all Members, from every party, who have left the House. Their contribution will always be appreciated and well remembered. I wish new Members well and I am sure that they will enjoy the House as much as I have since my election in 1979. If I receive their support today, I will be a Speaker who will be approachable and who will help and advise them.

I have said previously, and I say today, that a Speaker has a clear duty to every section of the House, especially to Back Benchers. It is the Speaker's duty to serve the House, not the Executive—

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Anne Picking (East Lothian) (Lab): It's in the bag. *[Laughter.]*

Michael J. Martin: I think that I hear a voice of approval.

Re-elected Members will know that I think that it is right and fitting that a Cabinet Minister, and any Minister, who has some new statement to make, should make that statement here, on the Floor of the House. Her Majesty's official Opposition have built-in rights and privileges that the House has rightly given them. I say to those from minority parties represented here today, however, that their voices must be heard— *[Interruption.]* The Speaker-elect can hear them. I always remember the late Lord Callaghan saying, when he was Home Secretary:

"It is not just the case that the majority rules; the voices of the minorities must be gathered, and listened to, in any true parliamentary democracy."

As Speaker, I have received Speakers from our Commonwealth and from democracies from all over the world. I have also received many charitable organisations and educational bodies in Speaker's House. I wish to continue that work on behalf of the House of Commons.

The House is very fortunate in that we have an excellent staff: the cleaning, catering, Library and security staff, and many others who serve us so well. On behalf of the House, I should like to thank them. In these days of high security, I should also like to thank our Serjeant at Arms staff. They are excellent people, who have proved their great value in ensuring that every Member, the staff of the House and of course the public are well protected. I particularly thank our Clerk of the House, Roger Sands, Mr. Peter Barratt, the acting Speaker's Secretary, and the Chairman of Ways and Means and the First and Second Deputy Speakers for all their help and support in the last Parliament.

Let me take this opportunity to express my personal gratitude to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen). Both have been a great source of support to me.

It is a great honour to be elected Speaker. The House will decide on the motion. I take nothing for granted; I can only assure each and every Member that I will strive to be fair.

2.56 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

I begin by congratulating you, Mr. Williams, on your accession as Father of the House. There is some indication that in the 1800s the position may have been subject to an election, but mercifully we have been spared that today. Your long and distinguished record of unbroken service is recognised across the House, and adds grace to today's proceedings.

It is with great pleasure that I commend the right hon. Member for Glasgow, North-East (Mr. Martin) as Speaker for our new Parliament. At his election in October 2000, he said:

"A Speaker has a clear duty to every section of the House, especially to Back Benchers, the minority parties and the Opposition parties. The House must hold the Executive to account. I am firmly of the view that the Speaker's duty is to serve the House, not the Executive power."—[*Official Report*, 23 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 14.]

He has reaffirmed that today.

We are all concerned about people's disaffection with politics and the democratic process. It is therefore even more important for this Chamber, the heart of our democracy, to hold fast to the rights of each one of us so that we can all hold the Executive to account; and it is to the right hon. Member for Glasgow, North-East that we turn, for if our rights are not maintained, by definition those whom we represent are disfranchised.

In the right hon. Gentleman, we have a man whose political career was not born in the Whips Office and who began that career not as a Minister, but as a House of Commons man. Many here today will be sitting on these green Benches for the first time. I can tell them that in the right hon. Gentleman they will have a Speaker of

great kindness. Many of us have, with gratitude, received a compassionate note when we have suffered bereavement, a cheery word in the Corridor when we have needed it, and always a smile.

Outside the Chamber the Speaker has many responsibilities, such as chairing committees and hosting receptions to which we are often invited. Indeed, I recall only too well the time when I thought I would never be invited to Speaker's House again, when Mr. Speaker invited me to a dinner that he was hosting for the Archbishop of Canterbury. Unfortunately, in the middle of the dinner I suffered an asthma attack. Two paramedics escorted me from Speaker's House. One said to the other, "I thought they said he was teetotal."

Mr. Speaker, you kindly invited me again to a most wonderful evening at Speaker's house, which I shall always treasure. That was your famous Burns night supper. I only wish that the rest of the House could have been there to hear you play the bagpipes to your guests. You are a member of the Glasgow college of piping. It is a talent that not many know you have. If only our new year celebrations could begin with you in that Chair welcoming us back—it would be a wonderful way to start the new year.

You have not been too grand to take advice. I recall you telling us the advice that you were given by Speaker Boothroyd:

"Be firm, especially with Senior Members. Don't let them pressure you and try to pull rank".

You have shown that you can take that advice. Many times, we senior Members have sat through long hours of debate on these green Benches waiting to be called, wondering whether to take an aspirin in case deep vein thrombosis set in. I can assure all Members of the House, old and new, that this Speaker treats all of us the same. He is a fair man, a kind man, a House of Commons man. I commend him to the House.

Question put and agreed to

Resolved,

That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Whereupon MR. ALAN WILLIAMS *left the Chair, and* MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *was taken out of his place and conducted to the Chair by* MRS. ANGELA BROWNING and ANN KEEN. *[Applause].*

Mr. Speaker-Elect *(standing on the upper step)*: Before I take the Chair as Speaker-elect, I wish to thank the House for the honour that it has bestowed upon me. I am aware that this is the greatest honour that the House can give to any of its Members. I pray that I shall justify its continuing confidence and I propose to do all within my power to preserve and to cherish its traditions.

3.2 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Geoff Hoon): Mr. Speaker, may I, on behalf of the entire House, congratulate you on your re-election? May I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Alan Williams) on becoming Father of the House? He has served the House and his constituency with distinction since his election in October 1964, both on the Government and Opposition Front Benches and, of course, as a highly respected Back Bencher. He has contributed both as a member of the Select Committee on Public Accounts and as an incisive Chairman of the Liaison Committee. He is a worthy Father of the House and we are all grateful to him for his supervision of your election today.

Mr Speaker, this is your third election as Speaker. You became the 156th Speaker in October 2000. You were unanimously re-elected in June 2001 and have been again for the 2005 Parliament. You have throughout served this House with impartiality, wisdom and good humour. I have no doubt that you will continue to do so.

We all know how important it is to you, Mr Speaker, that you have the strong support of your wife Mary. You are proud of your roots in Scotland, the trade union movement and of being the first Roman Catholic Speaker since the Reformation.

I note from my incoming brief that the other place has discussed the election of their own Speaker. I want to make it clear from the outset that, as far as this House and this country are concerned, you are the only Speaker.

The House, noting your obvious reluctance, is very grateful to you, Mr. Speaker, for agreeing to serve once again. That reluctance is the result of the responsibility that the position brings and, historically, even the prospect of more than a little danger. You are following in the footsteps of previous Speakers who have been forcibly expelled from this House, imprisoned or even beheaded.

The strain of being Speaker comes in many guises. There were reports that Mr. Speaker Fitzroy would remark to himself in a voice audible at least to the two Front Benches, "When is this boring fellow going to sit down?" [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I decided to include that because undoubtedly the sketch writers will say it in any event.

Sir John Cust, Speaker from 1761 to 1770, collapsed in the Chair of the House and died a few days later. Family tradition that his death was caused by ailments brought on by long periods of confinement in the Chair were confirmed in a newspaper report of 27 January 1770 that the House of Commons had just introduced a rule allowing for the Speaker to depart the Chair whenever the usual calls of nature should require his absence, adding that

"the want of so provident a regulation is thought to have hastened the death of the last Speaker".

The modern equivalent of these ancient strains is probably to be done over by the sketch writers in the Press Gallery. When attacked in such circumstances, Mr. Speaker, no doubt the House could develop its historic powers to deal with dissent in more modern ways. It could introduce, for example, an anti-Speaker behaviour order; an ASBO for sketch writers who we feel might benefit from a short sharp stay in the Tower of London.

We look to you, Mr. Speaker, to uphold the

"ancient and undoubted rights and privileges"

of this House and to keep order in our debates. We have every confidence that you will keep all of us in this House, and us in government, on the right side of the rules in the Parliament ahead.

[Geoff Hoon]

Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to have been appointed Leader of the House. In carrying out my responsibilities, I will ensure that colleagues in government are reminded of the importance of their duties in this House and of their accountability to its Members. It is a singular privilege to be elected as a Member of Parliament. It is a great honour to work for the people we represent. All of us on the Government and Opposition Benches have a duty to defend and uphold the powerful conventions of our democracy. Your role, Mr. Speaker, is the very embodiment of those traditions. We wish you well.

3.7 pm

Michael Ancram (Devizes) (Con): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of Members on these Benches, may I welcome your re-election as Speaker? This tribute normally would be paid by the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone & Hythe (Michael Howard), but as you will understand, he is attending the service for the tsunami victims in St. Paul's at this moment. I know that he adds his congratulations and tributes to you as well.

May I also congratulate the new Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Swansea West (Alan Williams)? He and I have served together on the Public Accounts Committee and the British-American parliamentary group, and I pay tribute to him for the enormously important work that he has done on both of those bodies. I am sure that he will fulfil his role as Father of the House with great distinction although, before the election, he let me know that he was rather keen not to have undertake it as it made him feel a little elderly. I am sure that we will forgive him that.

It is a particular pleasure for me to be able to welcome you and to pay tribute to you today, Mr. Speaker. You and I go back a certain distance in politics, to the days when I was in Scottish politics and we were colleagues on the old Scottish Grand Committee, where we crossed swords on many occasions. I look back to those days with warm recollection.

Over the years, you as Speaker have been very distinctive in the style that you have cut. You have been enormously approachable, accessible to all Members and fair. You have been friendly to us all and you have shown a great feeling for this House. I hope, pray and believe that you will continue to do that in your role. You have proved to be a great custodian of the rules, privileges and traditions of this House, a very important part of the Speaker's role that you have again fulfilled with distinction.

We do look to you, Mr. Speaker, to be an independent Speaker in dealing with all the parties in this House. You will have noticed the cheer that you got when you re-emphasised that you are here not to work for the Executive, but to protect the rights of others, particularly those of Back Benchers. May I say from my position that I hope that you will occasionally feel able also to protect the rights of Opposition Front Benchers?

You have shown yourself, Mr. Speaker, to be a great defender of Parliament's status, and you have reiterated today the importance of the Executive's regarding this House as the port of first call—that statements should be made in this House before they are given to the press, and that this House should be treated with the respect that it deserves as a democratic institution. Our democracy depends on a strong House of Commons and an accountable Executive, and in many ways you are the bridge that can help to hold that balance.

Over the years since becoming Speaker, you have avoided one particular duty. On occasion, it is one of the onerous duties of a Speaker of the House to cast a casting vote when there is a tie in a Division. Sadly, that has not been a great necessity over the years since you became Speaker, but I hope that in the coming years, we will engineer a situation in which we might require you to carry out that onerous task.

Our job, Mr. Speaker, is to hold the Government to account, and I am sure that you will keep us up to that. One of your great injunctions in the last Parliament, which I hope you will reiterate, was to tell Front Benchers to be short in their questions and in their answers. I am sure that we will try to obey you in that regard. May I thank you for your past kindness and wish you well, on behalf of my party, for the future? Our wishes go with you for another very successful term as Speaker, holding that great office in this great House.

3.11 pm

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): Mr. Speaker, may I, on behalf of my hon. and right hon. Friends, associate myself with the unanimous congratulations that you have received today on your re-election as Speaker? We wish you all possible success for the coming Parliament, and may I say that for me, it is a particular pleasure for one Glasgow boy to congratulate another? Kelvinbridge salutes Springburn, and although you now represent Glasgow, North-East, I suspect that it will always be Springburn to you; it will certainly always be Springburn to me.

I should like also to congratulate the new Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Swansea West (Alan Williams), whose friendship and wisdom I have had occasion to be grateful for over several years; both qualities will doubtless be available to the whole House in his new capacity. But those congratulations are tinged with one regret: the retirement of Tam Dalyell. I am not sure whether I will miss that frisson of apprehension and anxiety that the perfunctory early-morning telephone call, beginning with the words "Tam, here", induced in me from time to time. However, I suspect that my relief at the absence of such calls will be as nothing compared with that of the Government Chief Whip. We and you were right to mention the contribution of Kathleen Dalyell, and we might just pause a moment and think ahead. She is going to have to give Tam lunch every day of the week now.

Mr Speaker, we must all share a sense of disappointment at the continuing lack of engagement in elections on the part of so many of our fellow citizens. That being so, I hope that we in this place will continue in our steps to examine our procedures and practices, in an effort to ensure that they are as relevant and comprehensible as possible to those outside it. You will not be surprised to learn that during those discussions, we will argue that three-party politics in the country should be reflected in three-party politics in the House. Perhaps there is also something that we can learn from the other place.

For today, however, it is enough to say that we are delighted, Mr. Speaker, to join in the unanimous endorsement of your continuing responsibility in presiding over our proceedings.

3.14 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Mr. Speaker, I came to this House more than 35 years ago, when I sat on the Government Benches. I was judged very swiftly by the Speaker, who said that I spoke too loud and that the Lords were having trouble carrying out their business—*[Interruption.]* I had thought that that should be a credit to me!

I should like to congratulate the Father of the House and endorse all that has been said about Tam Dalyell. I always admired him because he stuck to what he believed in and he kept at it, which I believe are good principles to follow in the House.

I am glad that you, Mr. Speaker, are in a minority, because we both refrain from indulging in the stronger waters—or the devil's buttermilk, as I sometimes call it. Although we differ in religion, we have long felt mutual admiration, and I must say that I have been graciously received by you, Mr. Speaker, and your good wife on many occasions, which I greatly appreciate.

I said on the last opening sitting that I hoped that you would remember, Mr. Speaker, that the numbers on the Democratic Unionist Benches had increased. Some of my colleagues do not think that you have learned that lesson, so we thought that we would increase again in order to teach the same lesson again. As you looked over at me, Mr. Speaker, I wondered what you were thinking. I think that you may have thought that Paisley had gone left or taken a left turning. If I took a left turning to sit a little further up these Benches, that would be okay, but I want to assure you that I am still the same as I always was and I hope to continue that way. I wish you well, Sir, and I hope that you will remember that there are nine of us now.

3.16 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Mr. Speaker, speaking as someone who partakes very modestly in the devil's buttermilk, I do not think that I shall ever need a microphone system to hear the voice of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley).

On behalf of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, I warmly congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your second unanimous re-election by the House. I also congratulate you, despite the best efforts of my party, on your thumping majority in Glasgow, North-East. Your campaigning in a non-political way is perhaps, given your thumping majority, a tactic that we should all employ.

It is five years—quite recent history—since you, Mr. Speaker, were first elected. At that time, a number of voices were raised—some in the House, many elsewhere—with question marks about your nationality, your class and even, in some cases, about your religious persuasion. It strikes me now how still those voices are as, over the past five years, your command and authority over the House has grown enormously. Your authority is based not on draconian punishment—though I would advise new Members not to chance their arm too far, and I speak from some personal experience in these matters—but on our belief in your fairness, your impartiality and the trust that we have in you to be a Speaker for all parts of the House.

I am encouraged that you have committed yourself, Mr. Speaker, to be a Speaker of this House, not of the Executive. I also greatly welcome your commitment, which has been demonstrated over the last five years, to listen to all parts of the House and to encourage the voices of minorities to be heard. That was particularly important when there were large majorities in the House, and it is now—during these interesting times in which the House now lives—even more important.

Mr. Speaker, I wish you and Mary many happy years in the premises that you now occupy and in the post and position that you now grace.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Coaker.]*

MR. SPEAKER-ELECT *thereupon put the Question, which being agreed to, the House adjourned accordingly, until tomorrow, and* MR. SPEAKER-ELECT *went away without the Mace before him.*

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes past Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 12 May 2005

The House having met at Eleven o'clock, and the Speaker-Elect having taken the Chair;

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners;

The House went; and, having returned—

Election of Speaker

Mr. Speaker: I have to report that this House has been in the House of Lords where Her Majesty, by Her Royal Commissioners, has been pleased to approve the choice made of myself for the Office of Speaker. I have, in your name and on your behalf, made claim by humble petition to Her Majesty to all your ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, particularly to freedom of speech in debate, freedom from arrest and freedom of access to Her Majesty whenever occasion shall require, and that the most favourable construction shall be put upon all proceedings. All these Her Majesty, by Her Commissioners, has been pleased to confirm in as ample a manner as they have ever been granted or confirmed by Herself or by any of Her Royal Predecessors.

My first duty to the House is to report my respectful acknowledgement and grateful thanks for the great honour you have conferred upon me in placing me in the Chair.

Members Sworn

Mr. Speaker: I must now call upon the Members of the House, according to the usual custom, to take the Oath of Allegiance at the Table of the House, first doing so myself.

Thereupon MR. SPEAKER *first, alone, standing upon the upper step of the Chair, took and subscribed the Oath.*

Mr. Speaker: Before Members take the Oath or affirm, I remind the House that the support provided to Members by way of allowances for staff, travel and other purposes will not be available to Members who have not taken the Oath or affirmed before the date of the Queen's Speech, next Tuesday. The only exception will be Members who, before that date, have sent me a letter informing me that, for health or other good reasons, they cannot attend to take their seats immediately after the election but desire to do so at the earliest possible moment.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I indicate my intentions with regard to the taking of the Oath by right. hon. and hon. Members. I propose to call, first, the Father of the House; then members of the Cabinet; then members of the shadow Cabinet; then all Privy Councillors not included in those two groups, wherever they may be sitting; and then other Ministers. Thereafter I shall call other hon. Members according to seniority determined on the basis of the Parliament of first entry or, for those with broken service, that of most recent entry.

The first batch will be those elected in or before the 1987 Parliament. Thereafter I shall proceed to call Members to take the Oath or affirm by successive Parliaments. I hope that, by late this afternoon, we will have made sufficient progress to enable all Members to swear in who wish to do so. The House will sit again on Monday at 2.30, when I shall call Members according to seniority where possible, on the basis of the Parliament of first entry or, for those with broken service, that of most recent entry.

Those arrangements are very similar to those adopted at the start of the previous Parliaments in 1997 and 2001, and they follow the recommendations of the Procedure Committee. I hope that Members will come forward in an orderly manner. I remind Members that the taking of the Oath, as a proceeding of the House, is recorded by the television cameras and that anything said or done by Members may appear on television or be picked up by microphones. For the same reason, I will not hesitate to intervene if I consider that any Member is behaving inappropriately or using the occasion for an inappropriate purpose. Let us now begin.

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Alan John Williams, *for* Swansea West

Right honourable Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, Sedgefield

Right honourable John Leslie Prescott, Kingston upon Hull East

Right honourable James Gordon Brown, Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath

Right honourable John Whitaker Straw, Blackburn

Right honourable David Blunkett, Sheffield, Brightside

Right honourable Margaret Mary Beckett, Derby South

Right honourable Patricia Hope Hewitt, Leicester West

Right honourable Alistair Maclean Darling, Edinburgh South West

Right honourable Alan Arthur Johnson, Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle

Right honourable Tessa Jane Helen Douglas Jowell, Dulwich and West Norwood

Right honourable Charles Rodway Clarke, Norwich South

Right honourable Hilary James Benn, Leeds Central

Right honourable Peter Gerald Hain, Neath

Right honourable John Reid, Airdrie and Shotts

Right honourable Ruth Maria Kelly, Bolton West

Right honourable David Wright Miliband, South Shields

Right honourable Desmond Henry Browne, Kilmarnock and Loudon

Douglas Garven Alexander, Paisley and Renfrewshire South

Right honourable Ian McCartney, Makerfield

Right honourable Geoffrey William Hoon, Ashfield

Right honourable Hilary Jane Armstrong, North West Durham

Right honourable Michael Howard, Folkestone and Hythe

Right honourable David Michael Davis, Haltemprice and Howden

Right honourable Francis Anthony Aylmer Maude, Horsham

Christopher Stephen Grayling, Epsom and Ewell

Oliver Heald, North East Hertfordshire

Right honourable Sir Malcolm Leslie Rifkind, Kensington and Chelsea

David William Donald Cameron, Witney

Right honourable Oliver Letwin, West Dorset

Right honourable Theresa Mary May, Maidenhead

Caroline Alice Spelman, Meriden

Andrew David Lansley, South Cambridgeshire

David Roy Lidington, Aylesbury

George Gideon Oliver Osborne, Tatton

Alan James Carter Duncan, Rutland and Melton

Right honourable David John Maclean, Penrith and The Border

Right honourable Sir Gerald Bernard Kaufman, Manchester, Gorton

Right honourable Dawn Primarolo, Bristol South

Right honourable Kenneth Harry Clarke, Rushcliffe

Right honourable Charles Peter Kennedy, Ross, Skye and Lochaber

Right honourable Gavin Steel Strang, Edinburgh East

Right honourable Alan James Beith, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Right honourable Robin Cook, Livingston

The Reverend Ian Richard Kyle Paisley, North Antrim

Right honourable Thomas Clarke, Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill

Right honourable David Maurice Curry, Skipton and Ripon

Right honourable John McFall, West Dunbartonshire

Right honourable Andrew James Mackay, Bracknell

Right honourable Frank Gordon Dobson, Holborn and St Pancras

Right honourable Eric Forth, Bromley and Chislehurst

Right honourable Frank Field, Birkenhead

Right honourable John Michael Jack, Fylde

Right honourable Jacqueline Jill Smith, Redditch

Right honourable Beverley June Hughes, Stretford and Urmston

Right honourable Sir Walter Menzies Campbell, North East Fife

Right honourable Alun Edward Michael, Cardiff South and Penarth

Right honourable Douglas Martin Hogg, Sleaford and North Hykeham

Right honourable Paul Peter Murphy, Torfaen

Right honourable David Philip Heathcoat-Amory, Wells

Right honourable John Dominic Battle, Leeds West

Right honourable Sir John Paul Stanley, Tonbridge and Malling

Right honourable Robert William Ainsworth, Coventry North East

Right honourable Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough Haselhurst, Saffron Walden

Kim Scott Howells, Pontypridd

Sir John Valentine Butterfill, Bournemouth West

Right honourable Kevin John Barron, Rother Valley

Sir Michael Nicholson Lord, Central Suffolk and North Ipswich

George Edward Howarth, Knowsley North and Sefton East

Right honourable John Francis Spellar, Warley

Right honourable Ann Clwyd, Cynon Valley

Elliot Anthony Morley, Scunthorpe

Right honourable Richard George Caborn, Sheffield Central

Gerald Sutcliffe, Bradford South

John Derek Twigg, Halton

Right honourable Thomas McLaughlin McAvoy, Rutherglen and Hamilton West

Ivan Lewis, Bury South

Stephen John Ladyman, South Thanet

Fiona Margaret Mactaggart, Slough

David Marshall, Glasgow East

David Julian Winnick, Walsall North

James Whiteside Gray, North Wiltshire

David Gordon Clelland, Tyne Bridge

Peter Kilfoyle, Liverpool, Walton

Richard Charles Scrimgeour Shepherd, Aldridge-Brownhills
Shaun Anthony Woodward, St Helens South
Benjamin Peter James Bradshaw, Exeter
Simon Robert Key, Salisbury
Peter David Robinson, Belfast East
Jeremy Bernard Corbyn, Islington North
Kenneth Purchase, Wolverhampton North East
Timothy Stephen Kenneth Yeo, South Suffolk
Gwyneth Patricia Dunwoody, Crewe and Nantwich
Sir Peter Hannay Bailey Tapsell, Louth and Horncastle
Anthony Joseph Lloyd, Manchester Central
William Nigel Paul Cash, Stone
Eric Evlyn Illsley, Barnsley Central
James Dolan Cunningham, Coventry South
Patrick Allen McLoughlin, West Derbyshire
John Heppell, Nottingham East
Gillian Joanna Merron, Lincoln
James Fitzpatrick, Poplar and Canning Town
Frank Roy, Motherwell and Wishaw
Simon Henry Ward Hughes, North Southwark and Bermondsey
Malcolm Gray Bruce, Gordon
Malcolm Hunt Wicks, Croydon North
David George Hanson, Delyn
Diana Julie Abbott, Hackney North and Stoke Newington
Keith Vaz, Leicester East
Terrence Henry Rooney, Bradford North
Claire Margaret Ward, Watford
Kevin Denis Brennan, Cardiff West
Martyn David Jones, Clwyd South
Piara Singh Khabra, Ealing Southall
Right honourable John Yorke Denham, Southampton, Itchen
John Scott Cummings, Easington
Right honourable Harriet Harman, Camberwell and Peckham
Eric Anthony Martlew, Carlisle
Bridget Theresa Prentice, Lewisham East
Karen Patricia Buck, Regent's Park and Kensington North
Angela Evans Smith, Basildon
Phillip James Woolas, Oldham East and Saddleworth
Caroline Louise Flint, Don Valley
Joan Marie Ryan, Enfield North
Sir Michael William Hardy Spicer, West Worcestershire
Sir Nicholas Raymond Winterton, Macclesfield
Jane Ann, Lady Winterton, Congleton
Roger James Gale, North Thanet
David Anthony Andrew Amess, Southend West
Paul Phillip Flynn, Newport West
Michael Clapham, Barnsley West and Penistone
John Eric Austin, Erith and Thamesmead
Roger Leslie Berry, Kingswood
Richard Haines Burden, Birmingham, Northfield
Rachel Anne Squire, Dunfermline and West Fife
Andrew Peter Miller, Ellesmere Port and Neston
Edward Henry Garnier, Harborough
Eric Jack Pickles, Brentwood and Ongar
Ian Phares Pearson, Dudley South
Nigel Martin Evans, Ribble Valley
Robert Nelson Wareing, Liverpool, West Derby
Ronald Campbell, Blyth Valley
Ian Arthur Cawsey, Brigg and Goole
James Donnelly Touhig, Islwyn
Richard Geoffrey James Ottaway, Croydon South
Graham William Allen, Nottingham North
John Robert Greenway, Ryedale
Sylvia Lloyd Heal, Halesowen and Rowley Regis
Right honourable Alan Milburn, Darlington
Timothy Eric Boswell, Daventry
James Edward Thornton Paice, South East Cambridgeshire
Thomas Anthony Cunningham, Workington
Michael Connarty, Linlithgow and East Falkirk
Anne Caroline Ballingall McIntosh, Vale of York
Alan Campbell, Tynemouth
Ian Stewart, Eccles
David Leonard Watts, St Helens North
Parmjit Singh Dhanda, Gloucester
Robert Andrew Raymond Syms, Poole
Gordon Prentice, Pendle
Nicholas Richard Ainger, Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire
Gregory James Pope, Hyndburn
Maria Eagle, Liverpool, Garston
George Edward Mudie, Leeds East
Michael John Gapes, Ilford South
Matthew Owen John Taylor, Truro and St Austell
Angela Frances Browning, Tiverton and Honiton
Alex Elliot Anderson Salmond, Banff and Buchan
Elfyn Llwyd, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy
Glenda May Jackson, Hampstead and Highgate
William John Olner, Nuneaton
Peter James Luff, Mid Worcestershire
Peter James Bottomley, Worthing West
Vernon Rodney Coaker, Gedling
Michael John Foster, Worcester
Anthony David Wright, Great Yarmouth
Ann Coffey, Stockport
David Elliott Drew, Stroud
Lindsay Harvey Hoyle, Chorley
James Dobbin, Heywood and Middleton
David Anthony Crausby, Bolton North East
Geraldine Smith, Morecambe and Lunesdale
Robert Laxton, Derby North

Mohammad Sarwar, Glasgow Central
Barry Strachan Gardiner, Brent North
Margaret Patricia Munn, Sheffield, Heeley
Janet Elizabeth Ann Dean, Burton
David Neil Kidney, Stafford
Alexander John Randall, Uxbridge
Clive James Charles Betts, Sheffield, Attercliffe
Donald Michael Ellison Foster, Bath
Gregory Lloyd Campbell, East Londonderry
Denis Murphy, Wansbeck
Michael Thomas Hall, Weaver Vale
Peter Michael Ainsworth, East Surrey
Gary Nicholas Streeter, South West Devon
Iris Robinson, Strangford
The Reverend Robert Thomas William McCrea, South Antrim
Ashok Kumar, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland
Neil Francis Gerrard, Walthamstow
Joan Mary Ruddock, Lewisham, Deptford
Bernard Christison Jenkin, North Essex
William James Clappison, Hertsmere
Denis MacShane, Rotherham
Anthony Wayland Wright, Cannock Chase
Barry John Sheerman, Huddersfield
Helen Mary Jones, Warrington North
Jovanka Joan Humble, Blackpool North and Fleetwood
Shona McIsaac, Cleethorpes
John Rhodes Horam, Orpington
Colin Edward Breed, South East Cornwall
Phyllis Margaret Starkey, Milton Keynes South West
Julie Morgan, Cardiff North
Jacqueline Anne Harkness Lait, Beckenham
Damian Howard Green, Ashford
Graham Stuart Brady, Altrincham and Sale West
Jeffrey Ennis, Barnsley East and Mexborough
Frank Doran, Aberdeen North
Brian David Jenkins, Tamworth
Right honourable James Norwich Arbuthnot, North East Hampshire
Lynne Mary Jones, Birmingham, Selly Oak
Anne Begg, Aberdeen South
Betty Helena Williams, Conwy
Kali Carol Jean Mountford, Colne Valley
Nicolas John Gibb, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton
David Michael Chaytor, Bury North
Andrew Hartley Dismore, Hendon
Brian Iddon, Bolton South East
Andrew John Reed, Loughborough
David William St John Heath, Somerton and Frome
Laurence Anthony Robertson, Tewkesbury
Rudolf Jan Vis, Finchley and Golders Green
John Robertson, Glasgow North West
George Philip Willis, Harrogate and Knaresborough
Colin Robert Challen, Morley and Rothwell
Jeffrey Mark Donaldson, Lagan Valley
Margaret Moran, Luton South
Tom Levitt, High Peak
Adrian Edward Bailey, West Bromwich West
Nigel Christopher Waterson, Eastbourne
Fraser Kemp, Houghton and Washington East
James Murphy, East Renfrewshire
Ann McKechin, Glasgow North
Derek Leslie Conway, Old Bexley and Sidcup
Lembit Öpik, Montgomeryshire
Mark Fraser Williams, Ceredigion
James Keith Chapman, Wirral South
Eric Joyce, Falkirk
Andrew Henry George, St Ives
Marek Jerzy Lazarowicz, Edinburgh North and Leith
David Stewart Havard, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney
Andrew Guy Tyrie, Chichester
Paul Kenneth Burstow, Sutton and Cheam
Helen Mary Southworth, Warrington South
Christine Margaret Russell, City of Chester
Angus Robertson, Moray
Peter Wishart, Perth and North Perthshire
Nigel Alexander Dodds, Belfast North
Mark Wainwright Todd, South Derbyshire
John Cradock Maples, Stratford-on-Avon
James Sheridan, Paisley and Renfrewshire North
Tom Harris, Glasgow South
William David Wiggin, Leominster
Michael Thomas Hancock, Portsmouth South
David Lindon Lammy, Tottenham
Richard Thomas Taylor, Wyre Forest
Right honourable Nicholas Hugh Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend
Gordon Marsden, Blackpool South
David Simpson, Upper Bann
David Leslie Taylor, North West Leicestershire
Martin Charles Horwood, Cheltenham
David Wright, Telford
Right honourable Ann Noreen Widdecombe, Maidstone and The Weald
John Henry Hayes, South Holland and The Deepings
Andrew Robert George Robathan, Blaby
Charles Ashley Rupert Walker, Broxbourne
Hugh Bayley, City of York
David Lepper, Brighton, Pavilion
Keith Robert Simpson, Mid Norfolk
Hugo Swire, East Devon
Paul Stuart Keetch, Hereford
Thomas Anthony Brake, Carshalton and Wallington
Dominic Charles Roberts Grieve, Beaconsfield

Ian Richard Liddell-Grainger, Bridgwater
Michael Fraser Weir, Angus
Albert Owen, Ynys Môn
Christine McCafferty, Calder Valley
Paul Anthony Truswell, Pudsey
Fabian Hamilton, Leeds North East
Timothy Paul Loughton, East Worthing and Shoreham
Kelvin Peter Hopkins, Luton North
John David Pugh, Southport
Christopher David Mole, Ipswich
Stephen Pelham Pound, Ealing North
Charles Hendry, Wealden
Robert Edward Russell, Colchester
Gisela Gschaider Stuart, Birmingham, Edgbaston
Andrew William Murrison, Westbury
Humfrey Jonathan Malins, Woking
Ian Colin Lucas, Wrexham
Angela Eagle, Wallasey
Kevan David Jones, North Durham
Desmond Stanley Turner, Brighton, Kemptown
Hywel Williams, Caernarfon
John William Patrick Smith, Vale of Glamorgan
Ian Gibson, Norwich North
Judy Mallaber, Amber Valley
Paul Gerard Goggins, Wythenshawe and Sale East
Hazel Anne Blears, Salford
Dari Jean Taylor, Stockton South
Sandra Julia Gidley, Romsey
Howard Geoffrey Alvan Stoate, Dartford
Jonathan Rowland Shaw, Chatham and Aylesford
Constance Ann Cryer, Keighley
Jonathan Simon Djanogly, Huntingdon
Annette Lesley Brooke, Mid Dorset and North Poole
Sandra Osborne, Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock
Anne Picking, East Lothian
Michael Kevin Moore, Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk
Mark Richard Tami, Alyn and Deeside
Andrew John Turner, Isle of Wight
Sarah Louise Teather, Brent East
Philip Ian Hope, Corby
Cheryl Elise Kendall Gillan, Chesham and Amersham
Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Cotswold
Sir Alexander Paul Beresford, Mole Valley
Adam Price, Carmarthen East and Dinefwr
Henry Campbell Bellingham, North West Norfolk
Mark Gino Francois, Rayleigh
Mark Christopher Field, Cities of London and Westminster
John William MacDougall, Glenrothes
Richard Younger-Ross, Teignbridge
David Alan Heyes, Ashton under Lyne
Anne McGuire, Stirling
Robert Howard Marris, Wolverhampton South West
Christopher Paul Farrelly, Newcastle-under-Lyme
Paul Gordon Clark, Gillingham
Mark Phillip Hendrick, Preston
Wayne David, Caerphilly
James Gerald Douglas Howarth, Aldershot
Sir Stuart Bell, Middlesbrough
Angela Eileen Watkinson, Upminster
Andrew Stuart Mackinlay, Thurrock
Edward Jonathon Davey, Kingston and Surbiton
Andrew Stunell, Hazel Grove
Andrew Edmund Armstrong Selous, South West Bedfordshire
Ifor Huw Irranca-Davies, Ogmore
Iain David Wright, Hartlepool
Richard Michael Bacon, South Norfolk
Gwynfor Mathews Prosser, Dover
Mike Wood, Batley and Spen
Sally Curtis Keeble, Northampton North
Mark Prisk, Hertford and Stortford
Julian William Hendy Brazier, Canterbury
Norman John Baker, Lewes
John David Cairns, Inverclyde
Right honourable Wyvill Richard Nicolls Raynsford, Greenwich and Woolwich
Ian Graham Davidson, Glasgow South West
Martin Linton, Battersea
David Anderson, Blaydon
Siân Catherine James, Swansea East
Tobias Martin Ellwood, Bournemouth East
Adam Afriyie, Windsor
Jeremy Richard Browne, Taunton
Daniel John Rogerson, North Cornwall
Nicholas William Peter Clegg, Sheffield, Hallam
Timothy James Farron, Westmorland and Lonsdale
Anne Frances Milton, Guildford
Ann Lloyd Keen, Brentford and Isleworth
James Andrew Plaskitt, Warwick and Leamington
Anne Margaret Main, St Albans
Katy Clark, North Ayrshire and Arran
David Anthony Evennett, Bexleyheath and Crayford
Daniel Grian Alexander, Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey
Lee Scott, Ilford North
Stephen Roy Williams, Bristol West
Julia Anne Goldsworthy, Falmouth and Camborne
Alison Jane Seabeck, Plymouth, Devonport
Stewart Hosie, Dundee East
Daphne Barbara Follett, Stevenage
Grant V Shapps, Welwyn Hatfield
Michael Alan Penning, Hemel Hempstead
Nicholas Richard Hurd, Ruislip-Northwood
Kitty Ussher, Burnley

Lynda Ellen Waltho, Stourbridge
Daniel Robert Kawczynski, Shrewsbury and Atcham
Justine Greening, Putney
Jeremy Paul Wright, Rugby and Kenilworth
Brian Arthur Roland Binley, Northampton South
James Philip Duddridge, Rochford and Southend East
James Peter Brokenshire, Hornchurch
Eleanor Fulton Laing, Epping Forest
Philip Thomas Hollobone, Kettering
Theresa Anne Villiers, Chipping Barnet
Christopher John Mullin, Sunderland South
Robert Wilson, Reading East
Peter William Bone, Wellingborough
Andrew Mcculloch Love, Edmonton
David Michael Gauke, South West Hertfordshire
Nicholas Le Quesne Herbert, Arundel and South Downs
David Ross Howarth, Cambridge
Mark James Harper, Forest of Dean
David Gordon Mundell, Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale
Christopher Murray Paul Huhne, Eastleigh
Christopher James Fraser, South West Norfolk
Madeleine Moon, Bridgend
John David Penrose, Weston-Super-Mare
Mark Andrew Pritchard, The Wrekin
Maria Frances Lewis Miller, Basingstoke
Julian Murray Lewis, New Forest East
Shailesh Lakhman Vara, North West Cambridgeshire
Gareth Richard Thomas, Harrow West
Jonathon Cruddas, Dagenham
Richard Henry Ronald Benyon, Newbury
Mark Gerard Hoban, Fareham
John Douglas Wilson Carswell, Harwich
John Quentin Davies, Grantham and Stamford
John Mark Lancaster, North East Milton Keynes
Gregory William Hands, Hammersmith and Fulham
Right honourable Keith Trevor Hill, Streatham
Sadiq Aman Khan, Tooting
Right honourable Bruce Thomas George, Walsall South
Evan Leslie Harris, Oxford West and Abingdon
Jennifer Nancy Willott, Cardiff Central
Andrew Richard Rosindell, Romford
James Patrick Dowd, Lewisham West
Janet Anderson, Rossendale and Darwen
Edward Michael Balls, Normanton
Robert Ben Lobban Wallace, Lancaster and Wyre
Jeremy Hunt, South West Surrey
Lorely Jane Burt, Solihull
David Thomas Charles Davies, Monmouth
David Ian Jones, Clwyd West
Paul John Rowen, Rochdale
Michael Jabez Foster, Hastings and Rye
Lyn Carol Brown, West Ham
Philip Andrew Davies, Shipley
Stephen William Hammond, Wimbledon
Jo Swinson, East Dunbartonshire
Sir Peter Alfred Soulsby, Leicester South
Edward Henry Butler Vaizey, Wantage
Andrew John Gwynne, Denton and Reddish
Stewart James Jackson, Peterborough
Stephen Crabb, Preseli Pembrokeshire
Anne Christine Snelgrove, South Swindon
Alan Patrick Vincent Whitehead, Southampton, Test
Edward Julian Egerton Leigh, Gainsborough
Graham Eric Stringer, Manchester, Blackley
John Simon Bercow, Buckingham
Anthony David Steen, Totnes
Brooks Newmark, Braintree
Steven John Webb, Northavon
Gregory Thomas Mulholland, Leeds North West
Mary Helen Creagh, Wakefield
John Mark Durkan, Foyle
Right honourable Stephen John Byers, North Tyneside
Alasdair McDonnell, Belfast South
Susan Veronica Kramer, Richmond Park
James MacKay Cousins, Newcastle upon Tyne Central
Linda Gilroy, Plymouth, Sutton
Sarah Louise McCarthy-Fry, Portsmouth North
Michael Cathel Fallon, Sevenoaks
Siobhain Ann McDonagh, Mitcham and Morden
Helen Catherine Goodman, Bishop Auckland
Patrick Bosco McFadden, Wolverhampton South East
Right honourable Margaret Eve Hodge, Barking
John Flasby Lawrance Whittingdale, Maldon and East Chelmsford
Meg Hillier, Hackney South and Shoreditch
William Ernest Rammell, Harlow
John Vincent Cable, Twickenham

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn till Monday 16 May at half-past Two o'clock.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes past Four o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 16 May 2005

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

James Mark Dakin Purnell, *for* Stalybridge and Hyde

Right honourable John Alan Redwood, Wokingham

Yvette Cooper, Pontefract and Castleford

Right honourable Michael Andrew Ancram, Devizes

Right honourable John Matthew Patrick Hutton, Barrow and Furness

Simon Hugh McGuigan Burns, West Chelmsford

Francis Cook, Stockton North

Jim Knight, South Dorset

Antony Brian Baldry, Banbury

James Hood, Lanark and Hamilton East

Michael O'Brien, North Warwickshire

John Healey, Wentworth

Malcolm Douglas Moss, North East Cambridgeshire

Robert Michael Spink, Castle Point

Alan Keen, Feltham and Heston

Linda Riordan, Halifax

Clive Stanley Efford, Eltham

Right honourable Sir George Samuel Knatchbull Young, North West Hampshire

Adrian Mark Sanders, Torbay

Russell Leslie Brown, Dumfries and Galloway

John Douglas Naysmith, Bristol North West

Nicholas Douglas Palmer, Broxtowe

Elizabeth Marion Blackman, Erewash

Laura Jean Moffatt, Crawley

Right honourable Andrew David Smith, Oxford East

Desmond Angus Swayne, New Forest West

Crispin Jeremy Rupert Blunt, Reigate

Stephen Rothwell O'Brien, Eddisbury

Alexander Morrison Carmichael, Orkney and Shetland

Lynne Choona Featherstone, Hornsey and Wood Green

John Andrew Barrett, Edinburgh West

Sir Robert Hill Smith, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine

Eddie McGrady, South Down

Sammy Wilson, East Antrim

Right honourable William Jefferson Hague, Richmond (Yorks)

Robert Goodwill, Scarborough and Whitby

Martin Phillip Caton, Gower

Jon Hedley Trickett, Hemsworth

John Timothy Grogan, Selby

Peter John Law, Blaenau Gwent

Adam James Harold Holloway, Gravesham

Natascha Engel, North East Derbyshire

John Mann, Bassetlaw

Roberta Carol Blackman-Woods, City of Durham

Gordon Raymond Banks, Ochil and South Perthshire

Robert Charles Douglas Flello, Stoke-on-Trent South

William Etherington, Sunderland North

Edward O'Hara, Knowsley South

Right honourable Adam Ingram, East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow

Richard John Grenville Spring, West Suffolk

Hugh Michael Robertson, Faversham and Mid Kent

Mark Jonathan Mortlock Simmonds, Boston and Skegness

Patrick John Mercer, Newark

Siôn Llewelyn Simon, Birmingham, Erdington

Gregory David Clark, Tunbridge Wells

Michael Andrew Gove, Surrey Heath

David Stanley Borrow, South Ribble

Angela Christine Smith, Sheffield, Hillsborough

Neil Turner, Wigan

Louise Joyce Ellman, Liverpool, Riverside

Celia Anne Barlow, Hove

Joseph Edward Benton, Bootle

Catharine Letitia Hoey, Vauxhall

Martin John Salter, Reading West

Alexander Boris Johnson, Henley

Kerry McCarthy, Bristol East

Jessica Elizabeth Morden, Newport East

Diana Ruth Johnson, Kingston upon Hull North

Graham Charles Stuart, Beverley and Holderness

John Archibald, Viscount Thurso, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross

Rosemary McKenna, Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East

Nadine Vanessa Dorries, Mid Bedfordshire

Arthur Nicholas Winston Soames, Mid Sussex

Colin Burgon, Elmet

David Anthony Laws, Yeovil

John Leech, Manchester, Withington

Stephen Hepburn, Jarrow

Peter John Viggers, Gosport

Right honourable Jane Elizabeth Kennedy, Liverpool, Wavertree

Rosalie Winterton, Doncaster Central

Liam Dominic Byrne, Birmingham, Hodge Hill

Right honourable Clare Short, Birmingham, Ladywood

Right honourable Stephen James Dorrell, Charnwood

Douglas John Henderson, Newcastle upon Tyne North
Nigel Griffiths, Edinburgh South
Robert Graham Marshall-Andrews, Medway
Alistair James Hendrie Burt, North East Bedfordshire
David John Barrington Burrowes, Enfield, Southgate
Christopher Shaun Ruane, Vale of Clwyd
Khalid Mahmood, Birmingham, Perry Barr
Joan Lorraine Walley, Stoke-on-Trent North
Dawn Petula Butler, Brent South
Vera Baird, Redcar
Emily Thornberry, Islington South and Finsbury
Barbara Mary Keeley, Worsley
David Laurie Ruffley, Bury St Edmunds
Michael Louis David Fabricant, Lichfield
Alan Reid, Argyll and Bute
Harry Michael Cohen, Leyton and Wanstead
Austin Vernon Mitchell, Great Grimsby
Mark Fisher, Stoke-on-Trent Central
Liam Fox, Woodspring
Right honourable Michael John Mates, East Hampshire
Paul Alexander Cyril Goodman, Wycombe
David Lindsay Willetts, Havant
Anthony James McNulty, Harrow East
Sharon Hodgson, Gateshead East and Washington West
Andrew John Bower Mitchell, Sutton Coldfield
Dennis Edward Skinner, Bolsover
Charles Geoffrey Cox, Torridge and West Devon
John Charles Baron, Billericay
Peter Landreth Atkinson, Hexham
Andrew Francis Slaughter, Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush
Gregory Leonard George Barker, Bexhill and Battle
John Alexander Melvin Hemming, Birmingham, Yardley
John Martin McDonnell, Hayes and Harlington
David Hywel Francis, Aberavon
James McGovern, Dundee West
Thomas Anthony Watson, West Bromwich East
Philip Hammond, Runnymede and Weybridge
Roger Duncan Godsiff, Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath
Derek Murray Wyatt, Sittingbourne and Sheppey
Brian Harold Donohoe, Central Ayrshire
Roger Hugh Williams, Brecon and Radnorshire
Sylvia Eileen, Lady Hermon, North Down
Stephen Creswell Timms, East Ham
Julie Kirkbride, Bromsgrove
Christopher Robert Chope, Christchurch
Right honourable Gregory Knight, East Yorkshire
Edward Samuel Miliband, Doncaster North
Geoffrey Robinson, Coventry North West
Jamieson Ronald Reed, Copeland
Right honourable George Iain Duncan Smith, Chingford and Woodford Green
Claire Curtis-Thomas, Crosby
Andrew John Pelling, Croydon Central
David Wilshire, Spelthorne
Right honourable Michael Hugh Meacher, Oldham West and Royton
Ian Christopher Austin, Dudley North
Paul Robert Holmes, Chesterfield
Shahid Malik, Dewsbury
Ian Colin Taylor, Esher and Walton
Philip Martin Dunne, Ludlow
Angus Brendan MacNeil, Na h-Eileanan an Iar
Robert John Walter, North Dorset

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn till Tuesday 17 May at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o'clock.—*[Tony Cunningham.]*

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes past Five o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 17 May 2005

The House met at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Message to attend Her Majesty:

The House went; and having returned:

The sitting was suspended until half-past Two o'clock, and then resumed.

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

Right honourable John Selwyn Gummer, *for* Suffolk Coastal

Norman Peter Lamb, North Norfolk

Rosemary Elizabeth Cooper, West Lancashire

David Hamilton, Midlothian

Nicholas Barton Harvey, North Devon

Christopher John Bryant, Rhondda

Nia Rhiannon Griffith, Llanelli

Joseph Alan Meale, Mansfield

Simon Patrick Tipping, Sherwood

David Arthur Stephen Tredinnick, Bosworth

Andrew Murray Burnham, Leigh

Stephen James McCabe, Birmingham, Hall Green

Alan John Simpson, Nottingham South

Speaker's Statement

2.38 pm

Mr. Speaker: May I congratulate all Members on their success in being elected to this, the 54th Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. May I particularly congratulate those who have been elected to the House for the first time. The House always has sympathy with former Members who have lost out in the electoral contest, but there is no doubt that the House also benefits from the regular infusion of fresh blood. I am sure that that will be true on this occasion.

Great efforts have been made by the authorities of the House to ensure that Members, particularly new Members, have access to all information and briefing that they are likely to need about the House's services and facilities, its rules and procedures, and its conventions. You probably feel that you have more information than you can digest, but I urge you to make the effort and to attend as many briefing sessions as possible. Longer-serving Members are a valuable source of guidance and help. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] There is more. But—dare I say it?—their advice is not invariably up to date and reliable. There is no substitute for reading the documentation for yourself and seeking authoritative advice if you are in any doubt. Certainly, it will be no excuse for Members who break one of the House's rules to claim that they were not aware of it—at least, not after the first few weeks.

I draw your attention in particular to the House's code of conduct, which we should all observe in letter and in spirit, and to the rules that regulate the proper use of House facilities and allowances, which are also covered by the code. As the Freedom of Information Act has brought home to us, Members are answerable not just to the House but to the public for their conduct in this place. The same applies to behaviour in this Chamber. This House is rightly the place for strong and passionate argument and disagreement, but nothing does more to turn the public off our proceedings than debates that regularly descend into petty point scoring, spite and personalities. I hope that this Parliament will be characterised by robust debate, tempered with mutual respect.

Security is likely to be a continuing concern during this Parliament. Our recently appointed security co-ordinator is working, with the Serjeant at Arms and Black Rod, on a thorough review of our security precautions. I look to all Members to co-operate fully with any new measures that may need to be introduced. I also expect all Members to observe current security requirements, including the requirement to wear your security pass when moving around within the parliamentary estate.

Before the Clerk gives the customary First Reading to the Outlawries Bill, I shall put to the House the Sessional Order to the Metropolitan police. Before the Dissolution, legislation was enacted on the control of demonstrations and other activities in the environs of Parliament, including Parliament square, but I understand that this will not be brought into effect until later this year. I must express my personal hope that the Government will indeed put the new legislation into effect as soon as possible. That will make it unnecessary for the House to pass the Sessional Order again in future.

SESSIONAL ORDERS

METROPOLITAN POLICE

Ordered,

That the Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis do take care that the passages through the streets leading to this House be kept free and open and that no obstruction be permitted to hinder the passage of Members to and from this House during the sitting of Parliament, or to hinder Members by any means in the pursuit of their Parliamentary duties in the Parliamentary Estate; and that the Serjeant at Arms attending this House do communicate this Order to the Commissioner.

OUTLAWRIES

A Bill for the more effectual preventing Clandestine Outlawries was read the First time, and ordered to be read a Second time.

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS AND FIRST AND SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMEN OF WAYS AND MEANS

Ordered,

That Sir Alan Haselhurst be Chairman of Ways and Means, Sylvia Heal be First Deputy Chairman of ways and Means and Sir Michael Lord be Second Deputy Chairmen of Ways and Means.—*[Mr. Hoon.]*

Queen's Speech

Mr. Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that this House has this day attended Her Majesty in the House of Peers, and that Her Majesty was pleased to make a Most Gracious Speech from the Throne to both Houses of Parliament, of which I have, for greater accuracy, obtained a copy.

I shall direct that the terms of the Gracious Speech be printed in the appropriate place in the Votes and Proceedings. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

The Gracious Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government will continue to pursue economic policies which entrench stability and promote long-term growth and prosperity.

To this end, my Government will continue to secure low inflation and sound public finances.

My Government will build on its programme of reform and accelerate modernisation of the public services to promote opportunity and fairness. My Government will bring forward legislation in the key areas of public service delivery: education; health; welfare; and crime.

Education remains my Government's main priority. My Government will further reform the education system to improve quality and choice in the provision of schooling, and build on the progress already made to improve educational standards for all.

Legislation will be brought forward to offer greater support for working families by extending maternity benefits and improving the provision of child care.

My Government will continue to reform the National Health Service in a way that maintains its founding principles. Measures will be brought forward to introduce more choice and diversity in healthcare provision and to continue to improve the quality of health services and hospital hygiene. Legislation to restrict smoking in enclosed public places and workplaces will also be introduced.

A Bill will be brought forward to support patients who wish to seek redress should they experience problems with their healthcare.

My Government will continue its reform of the welfare state, in order to reduce poverty further, offer greater equality, and match rights with responsibilities.

My Government will introduce legislation to reform support for housing costs.

A Bill will be introduced to establish benefits which will facilitate a return to employment, while offering long-term support for those unable to work.

My Government will begin long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement. A Bill will be introduced to improve protection of consumers by bringing home reversion plans within the scope of the Financial Services Authority.

My Government is committed to creating safe and secure communities, and fostering a culture of respect.

Legislation will be taken forward to introduce an identity cards scheme.

A Bill will be introduced to give police and local communities new powers to tackle knives, guns and alcohol-related violence.

Further legislation will be introduced to tighten the immigration and asylum system in a way that is fair, flexible, and in the economic interests of the country.

Proposals will be brought forward to continue the fight against terrorism in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

My Government will bring forward legislation to reduce re-offending by improving the management of offenders.

Legislation will be introduced to reform the criminal defence service, making better use of legal aid resources.

My Government believes that the welfare of the child is paramount. A Bill will be introduced to establish a barring and vetting scheme, and other measures to provide better protection for children and vulnerable adults.

Legislation will be introduced to safeguard the welfare of children in circumstances of parental separation and to improve the process of inter-country adoption.

My Government will continue with legislation to provide a new framework for the provision of compulsory treatment of those with mental disorders.

Legislation will be introduced to modernise charity law, to develop a vibrant, diverse and independent charitable sector.

My Government will take forward proposals to introduce an offence of corporate manslaughter.

My Government will bring forward measures to tackle those who incite religious hatred.

Legislation will be introduced to combat discrimination and to establish the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

My Government is committed to achieving sustainable development and supporting rural services.

Legislation will be brought forward to ensure the better management and protection of the natural environment and to provide support for rural communities.

A Bill to modernise the management of common land will be introduced.

Legislation will be brought forward to help reduce casualties on the roads.

My Government is committed to promoting efficiency, productivity and value for money. Legislation will be introduced to streamline regulatory structures and make it simpler to remove outdated or unnecessary legislation.

Consumer credit law will be updated to provide greater protection for consumers and to create a fairer, more competitive credit market.

Company law will be reformed to encourage greater levels of investment and enterprise.

Members of the House of Commons

Estimates for the Public Services will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government will continue to work closely with the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, and will work to bring about the conditions necessary for the restoration of political institutions in Northern Ireland.

Legislation will be brought forward to encourage greater voter participation in elections while introducing further measures to combat fraud and increase security.

Legislation will also be introduced to reform the National Assembly for Wales.

My Government will bring forward proposals to continue the reform of the House of Lords.

If London is selected to host the 2012 Olympic Games, legislation will be introduced as soon as possible to establish the necessary powers to ensure the delivery of the Games, and that the requirements of the International Olympic Committee are met.

My Government will establish a single system of service law for the Armed Forces.

My Government will bring forward a Bill to give effect to the Constitutional Treaty for the European Union, subject to a referendum. Legislation will be introduced to ratify the treaty of accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union.

Other measures will be laid before you.

My Government will continue to play its full part in international affairs.

The Duke of Edinburgh and I look forward to our visit to Canada later today and to our state visit to Malta in November which precedes the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. We look forward to our visit to Australia in March next year for the opening of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, followed by our State visit to Singapore. We also look forward to receiving Their Majesties King Harald and Queen Sonja of Norway in the autumn.

The United Kingdom will take over the Presidency of the European Union in July, and my Government will work to build an increasingly prosperous and secure Europe.

My Government will use its Presidency of the G8 to secure progress in tackling poverty in Africa and climate change.

My Government will continue to push for a resolution of the conflict in Darfur.

My Government will continue to work to prevent terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and to combat drug smuggling and international crime.

My Government will work to strengthen commitment to the continued effectiveness of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and continue to contribute to a modern and representative United Nations.

My Government will work to secure a successful outcome from the United Nations Millennium Review Summit and the Ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong in December.

My Government will support the Iraq Transitional Government and Transitional National Assembly as they write a constitution and prepare for future elections.

My Government will continue to assist the Government of Afghanistan including in its counter-narcotics efforts, and to support better standards of governance throughout the world. Peace in the Middle East will remain one of my Government's highest priorities.

My Government will work to deepen and develop the strong partnership between Europe and the United States in order to meet these objectives.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

Debate on the Address

[First Day]

Mr. Speaker: Before I call the proposer and seconder of the humble Address, I should announce to the House the proposed subjects for debate on subsequent days, which will be as follows: Wednesday 18 May—foreign affairs and defence; Thursday 19 May—industry and the environment; Monday 23 May—home affairs and communities; Tuesday 24 May—health and education; Wednesday 25 May—the economy and welfare reform.

I call Mr. Kevin Barron to move the humble Address, after which I will call Vera Baird to second it.

2.46 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, I stand up with some trepidation, in view of the words that you have spoken over the last few minutes, in respect of the content of my speech. I hope that it falls within the rules and guidance that you have given us.

I am pleased and privileged to be asked to move the motion today. I believe that I am the first Member representing the Rother Valley constituency to be asked to do so. It is a great honour for me, and for my constituents. I am also pleased to note that the seconder of the motion is my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird), as I spent my early childhood years in New Marske, a village in her constituency.

My Rother Valley constituency has two great strengths: its natural beauty, which is steeped in history, and its people. Situated in the north of the constituency, where I live, are the ruins of Roche abbey, a 12th century Cistercian abbey dissolved by Henry VIII, which is a great tourist attraction for the area, as is much of the

"pleasant district of Merry England"

as described in Sir Walter Scott's classic "Ivanhoe", which mentions

"the beautiful hills and valleys that lie between Sheffield and the pleasant town of Doncaster".

Rother Valley has also played its part in the history of this building, the Palace of Westminster. After the fire of 1834, stone was cut from a quarry in Anston—it is still working today—loaded on to narrow boats and carried down the Chesterfield canal in the south of the constituency to the tidal river Trent, where it was transferred on to Humber sloops for its trip to Westminster.

The people of the Rother valley are open, honest and not afraid to speak their minds—something that I am always happy to be reminded of in election campaigns, unnerving as they can be. The last campaign was the sixth election victory for Labour that I have secured in

[Mr. Kevin Barron]

Rother Valley—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]—and it was the first in which I was able to say to my constituents, "This is what Labour has done for you," as opposed to "what Labour will do for you". As my agent, Alan Goy, always reminds me, we must never take our constituents for granted.

I was, however, slightly concerned to discover during the election campaign this year that the UK Independence party candidate's name was none other than Gordon Brown. Thankfully, my constituents are not easily fooled by someone who was obviously trying to cash in on the name of the most successful Chancellor of the Exchequer that this country has ever had. He lost his deposit.

The Rother Valley constituency is also known, among Conservatives rather than Labour party members, as not a bad training ground for would-be Conservative MPs. For the first time, a Conservative candidate for Rother Valley has succeeded in being elected to the House—although not to represent that area, I hasten to add. I am referring to the newly elected hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge). I thought that his seat was a good training ground for Labour candidates, but he told me earlier today that we missed taking it by about 5,500 votes, so perhaps I should not suggest that.

My roots were planted in the Rother valley in the mid-1950s, when my father moved his family to Maltby, where he had work in the local coal mine. It was there that I met my wife Carol. We brought up our family there, and our four grandchildren—Nancy, Ross, Joe and Clark—are thriving there.

The first school that I attended was Maltby Crags junior and infants school, built in 1912 to accommodate the children of the growing mining community. I mention it because it has recently closed and been replaced by a modern, state-of-the-art new building, which opened this Easter. It is the second new school to open in my constituency this year, the other one being a junior school in Dinnington. Alongside those two new buildings, we have had major investment in all other schools, thanks to this Government.

The raising of school standards has been a priority for the past two terms of this Government, and I am pleased to see education playing a prominent part in today's Queen's Speech. That builds on the progress already made, and I believe that we are paving the way for a more just and equal society.

At this point, I remind my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister that he accepted a request to open the new office and classroom block at his old primary school, Brinsworth Manor, which is in my constituency. He visited it during the election campaign—but I hope, John, that it will not be too long before we get a date for the next visit.

Nine months after I became the MP for Rother Valley in 1983, this country was plunged into the year-long miners strike. The constituency had six coal mines and a large workshop, which meant that about 4,400 miners were on strike for those 12 months. No matter what the rights and wrongs of the dispute were, the aftermath of the strike and the pit closure programme had a major psychological and economic effect on the communities of the Rother valley. Taking away major employment and offering little if anything in its place meant a massive increase in unemployment and poverty.

However, I do not want to dwell on those times in my speech today. Instead, I want to celebrate what has been happening in my constituency since 1997, under this Labour Government. The introduction of the new deal has reduced long-term youth unemployment by 88 per cent., and long-term adult unemployment by 90 per cent. Thanks to the positive action taken by the local regional development agency, Yorkshire Forward, and by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and other Government-funded organisations, unemployment is now below the national average. That is unprecedented in my constituency's history since records began.

In the heart of the constituency, more than £12 million has been spent on the redevelopment and decontamination of the old Dinnington colliery site. The site covers more than 200 acres, half of which is devoted to commercial development. The other half is high-quality public open space, with wildlife habitats. The site has won national awards for environmental best practice. The newspaper publisher Johnson Press has begun work on a state-of-the-art printing centre on the site; at £60 million, the investment is the largest single end-user on a former colliery site. The investment and vision of this Labour Government have transformed sites such as Dinnington and the once infamous Orgreave coke works into focal points of the region's economic infrastructure for the 21st century, just as the collieries themselves were the focal points in the 20th century.

I have been a Member of Parliament for more than 22 years. If I had to select the most exciting and challenging time in that period I would choose 1985, when I was appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Leader of the Opposition, Neil Kinnock. The years I spent with him probably gave me the best education a parliamentarian could have had in those days. We had many battles on many fronts, not least with a largely hostile media. During the 1987 general election campaign, a tabloid newspaper ran a full-page article entitled "Why I'm backing Kinnock", by Stalin. The paper had hired a psychic medium to canvass the spirits of major figures from history to establish who they would support in the forthcoming election. Apparently, Stalin was going to vote Labour. Winston Churchill, Henry VIII, Nelson and Boadicea were, unfortunately, backing Margaret Thatcher. And Keir Hardie had switched to the SDP.

Neil Kinnock's role in leading the Labour party back on the road towards government was no mean feat. Harold Wilson once compared leading the Labour party to driving an old stagecoach. If it is rattling along at a rare old speed, he said, while some may feel travel-sick, most of the passengers are so exhilarated that they will not start quarrelling. However, as soon as it stops, they will argue about which way to go. The trick, he pointed out, is to keep going at an exhilarating speed. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has just been re-elected for an historic third term. I believe, as the electorate believes, that we must be travelling at the right speed and in the right direction.

I have been chair of the Yorkshire and Humber group of Labour MPs for a good number of years, although not for as long as was once said by the journalist

Brendan Carlin, who wrote in the *Yorkshire Post* that I had been there since the Romans invaded. As such, I have kept an interest in regional as well as national politics. I do not know the exact number of by-elections that I have been involved in over the past 20 years, but the one that sticks in my mind was in Hemsworth just before the 1997 general election. I was on the street with the candidate outside Hemsworth post office when I was approached by an elderly lady who peered into my face and said, "Excuse me, are you new Labour?" Cautiously, I replied that I was proper Labour. "Thank God, for that," she said, "I can't stand that Arthur Scargill."

The House may know that I have had a long-standing interest in health matters, as a shadow Minister, in chairing all-party groups and in campaigns on public health, particularly against tobacco-related diseases. I applaud the proposed legislation to restrict smoking in enclosed public places and in the workplace. I hope that that will have a comprehensive effect in offering protection to all workers in all workplaces. I also welcome the Government's commitment to introduce more choice and diversity in health care provision and further improvements in the quality of health care services and hospital hygiene.

I note that the Government are committed in the Queen's Speech to continuing the pursuit of economic policies that promote long-term growth and prosperity and to continue reform of the welfare state in order to reduce poverty and offer greater equality. The Government's welfare to work programme is having a positive effect on the lives of many of my constituents.

For many years, I have been the chair of the all-party Bulgaria group, and I have observed with interest the progress that Bulgaria has made to establish itself as a democratic state. In recent years, I am pleased to announce, interest in the group has increased, commensurate, I think, with the probability of Bulgaria's joining the European Union, although that may be in no small measure due to our annual Bulgarian wine-tasting evening, which attracts rather a large turnout of Members. I look forward to supporting the legislation announced in the Queen's Speech to ratify the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union.

It is unusual for a Back-Bench MP to speak to such a well attended Chamber. Rarely do we have such a captive audience. But what makes this occasion unique is that I have been given the honour of proposing this motion at the beginning of an historic third-term Labour Government, and I commend the motion to the House.

3 pm

Vera Baird (Redcar) (Lab): I rise to second the motion on the Gracious Speech with a warning from the Chief Whip ringing in my ears that I should speak for only 10 minutes. I love deadlines—it is the whooshing noise that they make as I pass them by. I am very pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron). He mentioned his distinguished role as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, but he also did this party great service in Opposition as a spokesperson on energy, employment and then health. He continues to serve Parliament with distinction, in particular on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and well merits his status as a Privy Councillor.

My right hon. Friend clearly had a great destiny, as he was born in Redcar. I know the school that he used to attend. It is a very good school—now. *[Laughter.]* It was somewhat ahead of its time, because in his days there, children were searched for guns and knives on the way in. If they did not have any, they were given some. *[Laughter.]* I would not say that it was a tough school, but it was appointed its own coroner. *[Laughter.]* I should point out to my constituents from New Marske that those were jokes.

I have paid tribute to my right hon. Friend, but I do not want to leave tributes behind without mentioning the person who made this speech in 2002, the former Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. She is a delightful woman. She was a dedicated constituency Member and a talented parliamentarian. It is tragic that she lost her seat, and it is dreadful that she suffered the treatment that she did in the campaign of her successor.

The election campaign in Redcar was better humoured. On the bank holiday, we walked around at the seaside, carrying tall sticks with posters of me at the top. They reminded me uncomfortably of the way in which, in mediaeval times, people who had been executed had their heads put on poles for display. However, there was no one to behead me in Redcar at the election. The Tory candidate, the London-based chief of staff of a Front Bencher, did not find Redcar until the third Saturday in April, and then he seemed to lose it again until election night, when he came back and lost second place in the poll as well. None the less, we worked very hard and I thank my Labour party and other friends for that—but I note the Tory disregard for the people of a northern electorate. People in constituencies such as mine know which party cares about them, and I thank Redcar people for marking that out with their votes.

Redcar is a sandy seaside town, with New Marske, where my right hon. Friend was born, close by. Then a long road runs inland with the steelworks on one side and the chemical plant on the other, where nobody lives, until it reaches three former steel towns inland, which have—in varying degrees—the problems of inner urban, post-industrial deprivation. I am very fond of my constituency. After only four years, I have a high recognition factor. In fact, I think that I had it on the first day. I am, by a considerable margin, the tallest woman in Redcar, and the local paper further marked me out when I was first elected by headlining, "It's the Redhead for Redcar".

I am equally well known not to be local. I come from Oldham, but people who are converts to a place or faith often become more strongly committed than those born into them. I am of that school.

After I had spent half a lifetime working in a middle-class profession, Redcar—or rather, Redcar people—took me back four years ago to how I lived in my childhood. My father worked in labouring jobs. He was in and out of employment, although he was a hard worker, and indeed a good and Christian man. People were taken on and laid off in those days. There were no contracts of employment or redundancy payments Acts to give working families security.

My father got a job as a maintenance painter in a cotton mill. The mill took one line of spinning machinery out of operation each year and he

[Vera Baird]

spray-painted it so that it would not rust. That was his job. His employer did not give him or anyone else a mask, and at 55 he developed pneumonia in his paint-congested lungs and he died. I was 10. He was gone.

My mother went to work in a raincoat factory—no minimum wage then. I passed an exam to go to Manchester high school with a scholarship for the fees and uniform, but we could not pay the bus fares. To be honest, I am not sure that I would have had the confidence to go there. However, I went to the local school and did well. I went to Northumbria university to read law, transferring my roots to the north-east.

When I started to read more widely than my school books, I understood from my experiences in childhood the point of Labour politics. In Eston, Grangetown and South Bank—those three steel towns in my constituency—I can see children from backgrounds such as mine who still do not have the confidence to take up their opportunities. In my view, it was an amazing piece of luck that with under-educated parents in a struggling household I got so far as to be a lawyer and then Redcar's MP.

I do not want Redcar's children to get on only by being lucky. Those children need early years investment, giving them social skills and making them outgoing. That is why I applaud the emphasis in the Queen's Speech on child care, Sure Start, children's centres and the promise of 8 am to 6 pm wrap-around care for three to 14-year-olds. I welcome, too, the commitment that every child will have a tailored education and learning package and a detailed pupil profile.

My lucky rise from 95 Coalshaw Green road, Oldham, Lancashire was partly due to my parents' values. They were Methodists, and although I was not confident in the outside world I felt secure at home, reflecting their values. We all knew where we were. It is hard to feel secure unless we have values, and very hard to feel confident unless we can rely on other people living up to recognisable values, so I applaud the aim in the Queen's Speech of restoring respect to society. That is important not only to give the current victims of disrespect and antisocial behaviour their freedom again, but to give antisocial people the chance to look for satisfaction in their lives, rather than living as nuisances.

Although we need to restore respect, Redcar is nevertheless enjoying an upturn in prosperity after eight years of new Labour economic stability. The steelworks has a 10-year contract to export, through the river, all the slab it can produce. For the first time that anyone can remember, it is recruiting staff. That success has made Teesport, in turn, ambitious to develop a deep-sea container terminal to catch some of the rising container market and save thousands of lorry miles, delivering boxes up north from ports down south. Meanwhile, our petrochemical industry at Wilton flourishes, thanks to a Department of Trade and Industry grant that brought us huge US investment and turned the industry around. How would those companies—steel, chemicals and the port—have such ambition and such success if they were still living with the Government who brought them 15 per cent. interest rates, high inflation and boom and bust?

Some political parties might tell people to get on their bikes. We support viable local industries that can boost regional economic performance. That might mean that public spending in the north is higher for a while, but only as part of the understanding that every region has to be brought on to perform to its optimum to resource the top-class public services that we seek. I applaud the commitment in the Queen's Speech to reform those public services.

Lastly, I want to welcome the equalities Bill, establishing the commission for equalities and human rights. Discrimination too holds people back, whether it is against women, ethnic minorities, disabled, gay and lesbian people, or on the grounds of age or religion. It will not be ended by legal cases, by the accident of someone happening to discriminate against somebody who happens to have the courage or the cash to go to court and get a one-off ruling that no one else then knows about. That requires a change of culture, which will be driven positively by the commission.

I could talk more. I could talk about our ambition, consistent with the charity's motto to "Make poverty history". I could talk about a lot in the 45 Bills and five draft Bills in the Queen's Speech, all of which will bring opportunity for all and fairness much closer. But, despite the fact that I dislike deadlines, it is possible to talk too much. Once a judge commented to a jury:

"In Mrs. Baird's closing address there were no wasted words—she used every one I know at least twice."

He later added:

"Though I"

very much

"enjoyed listening to her arguments, I was sorry to miss my children growing up".

[Laughter.] So before I revert to type, I will commend the Gracious Speech to the House, and I will sit down.

3.11 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I warmly congratulate the proposer and seconder of the Loyal Address. Both spoke with fluency and wit and both are renowned as tireless campaigners for the causes in which they believe.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) entered the House the same year as I did, 1983, although we probably have rather fonder memories of that year than he does. Two years later, he became the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Neil Kinnock, but he has come a long way since then. Earlier this year, he came fifth in the ballot for private Members' Bills and he used it to propose a tax cut—in stamp duty, no less. As he explained,

"hard-pressed first-time buyers will see a significant reduction in their stamp duty bills, with hundreds of thousands . . . paying no stamp duty at all."

He is on the right lines and we look forward to his next proposal for tax cuts.

The right hon. Gentleman is also a keen supporter of Rotherham United. Unfortunately, they have been relegated, so they have changed their manager and are bringing in younger talent to complement the more experienced members of the team. It is a strategy I wholly recommend. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his excellent speech today.

Last July, the hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) was in *The Guardian's* list of 101 overlooked women intellectuals, but she has been overlooked no more. First, *Spectator* Back Bencher of the year, now seconding the Loyal Address, and soon, no doubt, in Government. And she was not the only member of her household to win an award last year. Her Bedlington terrier, Zack, won the Westminster dog of the year prize in October, although I understand that he was run very close in the sit-up-and-beg competition by the new Northern Ireland Minister, the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Woodward). As for the title "best-groomed poodle", I believe that the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) has ruled himself out this year. In contrast, the hon. and learned Lady, of course, has always been her own woman and she was not described as one of the brightest of the 2001 intake for nothing. Her speech today was a model of its kind.

I congratulate the Prime Minister on his election victory. The people have spoken and of course we respect their verdict. They elected a Labour Government, but they also voted for a stronger Conservative Opposition to hold the Government to account.

I also welcome the new Members on both sides of the House. This is a new intake of high calibre and we look forward to their contributions.

Immediately after the election, the Prime Minister said that he would now deliver on the people's priorities. As I said at the time, whenever he does so, we will support him and these days the Prime Minister needs all the support that he can get. His former Transport Minister says that he should go "sooner rather than later." His former Sports Minister says:

> "Every MP that comes back will tell him just how unpopular he was."

And his former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson), described him as "an enormous liability." But perhaps the best advice came from someone who worked with him even more closely than they did: the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Livingston (Robin Cook), who gave us the benefit of his reflections in a recent article in the *Evening Standard*. He mused:

> "We have all been here at some point in our lives. Most of us have known a friend who clings to a relationship long after the other partner has any appetite for it. We have sighed when they plead for one more chance or another full term. Eventually, one of us takes our friend down to the pub for a pint and tells him it is over."

Now perhaps I can offer the Prime Minister some advice of my own. It comes from personal experience. The way to get your colleagues to ask you to stay is to set a timetable for your departure. I hope that the Prime Minister will take that advice in the constructive way in which it is intended.

The Prime Minister said the day after the election that he had listened and learned, and that this time he would "focus relentlessly" on people's priorities. The signs, I fear, are not encouraging. Take the crisis in manufacturing. During the general election campaign, we saw the closure of Rover—a tragedy for thousands of workers and their families and a painful reminder of the problems faced by manufacturing industry. Britain's competitive position is under threat. What was the Prime Minister's response? He looked at this policy on trade and industry, and what did he do? Did he change the policy? Did he change the direction? To give him credit, he did take decisive action: he decided to give the Department of Trade and Industry a new name—a name designed to show that it was a great new organ of government: a Department for Productivity, Energy and Industry, but he had not looked at the acronym. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry told the *Financial Times* that the Department had attracted "various descriptions", including "Dippy". When asked whose bright idea that was, he replied:

> "I don't know. It certainly wasn't mine."

That is not the only thing on which the Prime Minister did not get his way. It is not just the names of the Departments: he was thwarted in deciding which Minister goes where. He was not able to get the Trade and Industry Secretary he wanted. He was not able to get the Education Secretary he wanted. He was not able to get the Health Secretary he wanted. He has been saddled with second-choice Ministers, but at least one person is delighted with his job: the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He says:

> "It's a fantastic privilege to be Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—having a castle to stay in".

Alas, his new deputy, the hon. Member for St. Helens, South, thinks differently. He is going to find his room a bit pokey and I am told that it has only got one butler.

Then there is the new Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Defence, Lord Drayson. Parliamentary Under-Secretaries spend lots of time travelling to far-flung places where the British flag still flies: Gibraltar, the Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands—all locations with which he and his tax advisers are very familiar indeed.

What about the Minister the Prime Minister forgot, the Minister for Women whom he appointed as an afterthought? He asks her to do the job in her spare time and tells her that she is not going to be paid. So much for the manifesto promise to narrow the pay gap between men and women?

We welcome many measures in the Government's programme. For example, we support legislation that will genuinely help in the fight against terrorism. We support any legislation that will restore the integrity of the voting system, which was recently described as something that would "disgrace a banana republic". But why are the Government continuing to ignore the advice of the Electoral Commission that voters should register individually? Why are on earth will the Government not agree to that?

In Northern Ireland, we support the Government's efforts to secure a comprehensive agreement, but there should be no place in government for any party that is engaged in crime or maintains its own private army. I hope that the Prime Minister will agree that the onus is now firmly on the republican movement to deliver what it promised in 1998.

I pay tribute once again to the courage and professionalism of British troops serving around the world, and especially in Iraq. The killing of Anthony Wakefield is a tragic reminder of the bravery that they show day by day.

The world faces many other challenges. Hundreds of thousands of people have died in Darfur. I repeat the view already expressed many times from these Benches

[Mr. Michael Howard]

that urgent action should be taken to bring that killing to an end, starting with a new resolution at the Security Council of the United Nations.

The Gracious Speech also mentioned Britain's presidency this year of both the G8 and the European Union. That gives us a singular opportunity to press for reform on the international stage and, in particular, to lift people out of poverty by fighting for freer and fairer trade. We also, of course, support a referendum on the European constitution. Will the Prime Minister confirm to the House the Government's unequivocal commitment to giving the British people a vote on that constitution even if other countries vote no? If he does so, why will he not name the day for the referendum?

The day after the election, the Prime Minister set out his priorities, the priorities that are meant to be reflected in the programme before us today: controlled immigration, school discipline, cleaner hospitals and police. Come to think of it, they sound rather familiar to me. In fact, it is almost a complete set. We had no idea that he was thinking what we are thinking. The only one of the five that is missing is lower taxes. I wonder why.

In looking at the Government's programme, our position is clear. Where the Government do the right thing, we will support them. We support more choice in schools and hospitals, and greater use of the independent sector where it provides quality and value for money—likewise with genuine reform of incapacity benefit and proper controls on immigration. On these measures, if the Prime Minister means what he says, takes a stand on the things that matter and sends a clear message to his Back Benchers, we will support him.

The Prime Minister's manifesto set out new Labour's commitments for a third term. In his first two terms, he found it impossible to keep just five pledges but, for his third term, there are 274. I suppose that he hopes that people will not notice when he breaks them. He says that there will be a points system for immigration, but what is the point of a points system without a limit? Is it not utterly pointless?

What of health reform? The Prime Minister was absolutely astonished to discover what everyone else knew: that his GP targets stop people getting an appointment when they want one. It is not just GP targets that are a problem. Hospital targets are too. We know that they stop hospitals dealing effectively with the superbug. The chief executive of the NHS himself says so.

I was pleased to hear that the Government are to introduce measures to provide for cleaner hospitals, but I was less encouraged to hear the Secretary of State say that, if hospitals fail, she will prosecute them. A simpler solution would be just to get rid of the targets. If only the Prime Minister would listen to his chief policy adviser, Matthew Taylor, who said:

"The downside of targets are several. One is that you get perverse outcomes . . . A second is that people cheat . . . But perhaps the greatest problem of targets is that they deny autonomy to frontline managers".

The reason why the Prime Minister will not scrap the targets is that he does not trust people. He does not trust professionals, parents or patients to make decisions themselves. In the misguided words of the Chancellor, Ministers do not know any other way than targets to achieve value for money.

The Prime Minister says—the hon. and learned Member for Redcar referred to this—that he wants to restore respect in Britain. I agree, and I have said so many times. Let me suggest one practical way in which we can do that. If children do not learn to respect their teachers at school, they will not respect others when they grow up. The one thing that would most encourage respect in the classroom would be to give head teachers complete control over what happens in their schools. That is the way to teach children respect at an early age, so if the Prime Minister takes action to bring that about, we will support him. The minority should never be allowed to ruin the education of the majority of the children in our schools.

The Prime Minister also promises a regulatory reform Bill—it is certainly needed. Just in the past fortnight, we have had figures showing bankruptcy up, insolvency up and more job losses on the way. Meanwhile, production, retail sales and manufacturing orders are all down. What is the Labour party's response? Last week, the Prime Minister's own Members of the European Parliament voted for more burdens to be placed on British business by abolishing the individual opt-out from the working time directive. His manifesto promised that the Government would work hard with Labour MEPs and would

"ensure that EU regulations are proportionate",

yet days after the election, in the first test of the Prime Minister's authority, his MEPs completely ignored him and voted for a measure that he described as "wrong" and "completely misguided". He has not even got the authority to get his Members of the European Parliament to listen to him.

It is not only red tape, but tax, too, so I want to remind the Prime Minister of his election promises on tax. On 15 April, it was put to him that almost every expert thought that he was

"going to have to raise National Insurance after the election".

He said:

"I don't agree with that at all".

On 20 April, he was asked:

"You are going to have to raise taxes after the election, aren't you?"

He said, "No".

On 28 April, he was asked:

"what new stealth taxes do you plan to introduce first?"

He said:

"well, I don't plan any".

There we have it: no increase in national insurance, no new stealth taxes and no raising of taxes at all. We shall not forget those promises. We will hold the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer personally responsible for each and every one of them.

I hope that those pledges prove more durable than those of the Liberal Democrats. Their education spokesman says that they might be offering tax cuts next time round. The decapitated Liberal Democrat ex-Member for Guildford said that the local income tax was unpopular with hard-working couples. What a surprise.

The right hon. Member for Neath (Peter Hain) promised that this programme of legislation would be

"a really strong, radical, fizzy first Queen's Speech."

He said:

"it's going to surprise people".

However, he was the one with the surprise coming because he is no longer Leader of the House. For the rest of the country, all we have had so far is more fizzy rhetoric. What matters now is delivery.

It is time to reward people who do the right thing: the people who play by the rules, work hard and take responsibility for themselves and their families. It is also time to restore respect in our society: to tackle the yob culture head on, to restore discipline in schools and to ensure that the punishment fits the crime. The Prime Minister talks about these things, so for the sake of our country, I hope that his actions will finally match his words. If they do, we will support him, but whatever happens, this party will hold him to account for the promises that he has made to the British people.

3.29 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I congratulate the proposer and seconder of the Loyal Address on their excellent speeches. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) and I have known and worked with each other for a long time, having both entered Parliament in 1983 on the back of a disastrous election defeat for our party. In those days, of course, winning just 209 seats was regarded as a catastrophic result for an Opposition party. Nowadays, it is apparently a cause for delirious celebrations. Within a few years, he and I were working closely together as shadow Energy Ministers, where his personal expertise as a former miner went some way to compensate for my total ignorance of the subject.

My right hon. Friend came to the House with a rich and interesting history. Just two years before he was elected a Member of Parliament, he had been Arthur Scargill's successful campaign manager for the National Union of Mineworkers presidency elections. Who knows? If he had stuck with those politics, he might have made a new recruit for the Liberal Democrats, but, fortunately, he did not. As an MP for a mining constituency and sponsored by the NUM, it took enormous bravery for him to stand up and criticise the leadership of his union over the handling of the strike. Despite savage personal attacks on him, he never flinched or gave ground. His principled stand won him the respect of Members of Parliament of all parties at the time.

My right hon. Friend's courage was also seen as he began the long and difficult job of modernising the party. As Parliamentary Private Secretary to Neil Kinnock, he did it with great skill and loyalty. He took on the job of heading the new clause 4 campaign with enthusiasm and dedication. I congratulate him on the same determination he has shown in his long campaign to reduce the death toll from smoking. I know that he is proud of this Government's action to curb tobacco advertising, but that he is determined to continue pressing us to do more to tackle that threat to public health. His was a superb speech. It showed not just ability but judgment and character. He deserves our heartiest congratulations.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) is also to be warmly congratulated. Like my right hon. Friend, she has a surprisingly colourful history. There cannot be many barmaids at a Pontin's holiday camp who have gone on to become one of the country's top QCs. When I asked my colleagues last night what I should say about her, one advised me to make a few jokes about women from working-class backgrounds who are staunch feminists and go on to become highly successful QCs. I thought about it and I simply say how deeply I admire such people.

I understand that my hon. and learned Friend was at first going to be a medical student, but decided that she would rather spend her time dissecting arguments than bodies. Medicine's loss has been the law and politics' gain. Her expert and passionate advocacy on behalf of the victims of rape and domestic violence in high-profile court cases has had a profound impact on how the modern law and the criminal justice process have evolved. Her energy, vitality and principle have made her a contributor to this House's debates, and she is respected by Members on both sides. As I represent a seat not far away from her constituency, in the north-east—a region, by the way, where our party held every single seat on 5 May—I know how successfully, through hard work, she has won the trust and respect of our constituents.

My hon. and learned Friend once said:

"The only way a working class girl from Oldham was able to become a QC was because of Labour Governments that saw the point in providing decent dry housing, good healthcare and free education for children like me. I want to repay some of that and make sure that others have the same chance."

There could be no better way of summing up the central purpose of this historic Labour third term.

Now for the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). He made some fun at my expense, but I say good luck to him for the future. Let me gently remind him, however, which party won and which lost the election. He has 197 MPs. We have 356, and I stand here and he sits there. After only three elections since the war has the Conservative party had fewer than 200 seats—this was one, and the others were in 1997 and 2001. The truth is that the people were not thinking what he was thinking. Unfortunately, they were remembering what we were remembering: 15 per cent. interest rates, 3 million unemployed, two recessions and under-investment in our public services.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman can put all of that behind him now, but his speech was rather like the election campaign: there were a few good lines but no real vision for the future of our country. He and the Conservative party did not just lose the election—they lost the argument in the course of the election. On the economy, their mixture of spending increases, tax cuts and borrowing cuts swiftly collapsed. On public services, we had the spectacle of the Conservatives being willing to do doing anything other than engage in debate on their flagship vouchers policies. The oddest thing about the election was that we were more interested in discussing Tory policy than the Tories were.

Where are those policies now? Who will defend cutting £35 billion from Labour's spending programmes now? *[Interruption.]* I am being told, "Get on." I assume that that policy has gone now. *[Interruption.]* Oh, so the Tories did not say that they would cut £35 billion from our spending programmes. Oh yes they did. How about national health service vouchers—has

[The Prime Minister]

that policy gone too? Have school vouchers? As a parting present, can we now be told—I know that they know—where was that fantasy asylum island?

Now, the battle is on for the leadership—the fifth Tory leader I will have faced. The most profound question in that debate appears to be to wear a tie, or not to wear a tie? Aspirant Tory leaders fall over themselves to appear tieless on TV—it is not so much a policy statement as a fashion statement. No wonder I am told that Lord Saatchi has left—to be replaced by Lord Gucci, no doubt. The only candidates—there is quite a field—who seem to stand no chance are those on the right and the left of the Tory party who want to debate policy. The most intelligent analysis of the state of the Tory party—I mean no disrespect to him—came from the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), who was immediately condemned by his leader as disloyal. However, the ultra-moderniser, the new party chairman, came to the rescue in his interview in this morning's *Financial Times*, which reports:

"Tim Yeo, leadership contender and former shadow cabinet member, has suggested that true modernisers needed to do more than just 'just appear on television without a tie'. But even Mr Yeo would concede that Mr Maude goes the extra modernising mile: he conducted his interview with the FT in his socks."

The mind boggles as to where further acts of modernisation might take us. That is today's Tory party: tieless, shoeless but, above all, clueless. It is not clothing the Tories need to discard, it is policy, and the sooner they realise that, the better. However, the party chairman got one thing right when he concluded his interview by saying:

"We need to look forward not back."

How right he is.

Not that the Liberal Democrats are any better. I understand that they have ditched the policies on which they fought the election, instituted a major policy review and now have a policy blank page. If they take my advice, the page will remain that way—it is more in keeping with their politics. Theirs is the party of Gladstone, Lloyd George, Beveridge, Keynes and, now, Brian Sedgemore—*[Laughter.]* They run to the right of Labour in Tory constituencies and to the left of Labour in Labour constituencies. In this Parliament, we are going to make them choose.

Only one serious programme for government was put forward in the election—the one that is now in the Queen's Speech. At the heart of the Queen's Speech are policies that prepare our economy for the future, continue the investment in and reform of the national health service and our education system, and protect our citizens from terrorism and crime. They are quintessentially new Labour: economic prosperity combined with social justice, right in 1997, being delivered now in 2005.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister still intend to serve out a full term? In any circumstances will he change his mind?

The Prime Minister: I have already dealt with that, in the course of the election campaign and afterwards. I think that my leadership of my party has been a bit more successful than the hon. Gentleman's leadership of his party. I say frankly, and probably to the delight of my colleagues, that when I do leave the leadership, I will not be coming back again.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe said that it was time that we delivered. Let us consider the state of the NHS today. We have 80,000 more nurses and 27,000 more doctors than in 1997. As for the estate of the NHS, 10 years ago, half of the buildings had been built before the NHS was created, and now such buildings represent only a quarter of the estate. There are more than 100 new hospital projects open or under way. Waiting lists are down to the lowest level for 17 years. I shall take two examples. In cardiac care, in 1997, more than 1,000 patients waited for a year to receive their treatment. Some of them waited two years. Many died waiting. Now it is a maximum of three months. There are 2.5 million patients treated with the right drugs, up from 300,000 in 1997. Heart deaths this year are 27 per cent. down on 1997.

In 1997, people often waited more than 18 months for treatment for cataracts, but now it is three months, with double the number of operations. That has been achieved by investment and by modernisation, and the process will continue. There is payment by results where hospitals are paid for the work that they do and patients have a choice of which hospital they go to. There is practice-based commissioning so that general practitioners can choose the most appropriate care. The "Agenda for Change" in the work force has meant that the number of nurses in training is up by 60 per cent. Medical school places are up by 70 per cent. GPs in Britain are paid roughly twice as much as they are in France, but in exchange for old demarcations and practices going and new ways of working.

Just a few weeks ago the King's Fund audit of the NHS said:

"Overall, in our view, the results of this audit are very positive. The ambition for the NHS has been appropriately high. There has been unprecedented investment. There have been significant improvements in most areas that the Government have focused policies on. Has there been a 'step-change' in NHS performance? If step-change means a significant shift of gear, with more and better services, then yes there has."

We accept, however, that there is much more to do. We shall introduce measures to improve public health with the ban on smoking in public places. There will be further money and modernisation to give NHS patients, by 2008, an 18-week maximum wait—and that is from the door of the GP to the door of the operating theatre. The average wait will be nine weeks. There will be a choice of hospital by 2008 and all breast and bowel cancer referrals will be done within two weeks. Under this Government, however, NHS money will be spent for NHS patients and treatment will remain free at the point of use.

In education, likewise, there has been delivery. By 2008, if we continue investing, investment per pupil will have doubled since 1997. In 1997, there were only 83 secondary schools which were non-selective and achieved the result of more than 70 per cent. of pupils with five good GCSEs. Today, the figure is 400. There are 130,000 more support staff and 30,000 more teachers in our education system. The number of failing schools has halved. There are 300,000 young people with education maintenance allowances. There are more teacher training places available than at any time since

the 1980s. Teachers' pay is up by 25 per cent. in real terms. Again, we accept that there is much more to do: extending specialist schools, the new city academies, the ability to gain foundation powers for all schools and guaranteed three-year budgets. There will be no return to selection at age 11 and the money spent will be spent on state pupils in state schools.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I congratulate the Prime Minister on his party's re-election. I want to ask him about another area of public investment. He supports choice and diversity in policy on health and education. Will he apply the same approach to local councils and local council housing so that councils that want to keep council housing can do so and council tenants who want to stay council tenants can choose to do so too?

The Prime Minister: Surely, the whole point is that we are allowing the tenants themselves to choose. Some of them have chosen to make the changes because they think that they will receive a better service.

As for child care, there will be a duty on local authorities to provide extended child care between 8 am and 6 pm for children aged three to 14. Sure Start will be expanded. Let us remember that, when we came to office, child benefit had been frozen, there was no working families tax credit, maternity pay was £55 a week and paid maternity leave was only 14 weeks. Now, child benefit is up by 25 per cent. in real terms, the child tax credit benefits millions of families in this country and maternity pay is more than double what it was. Maternity leave is 26 weeks, it will be increased to nine months and, in time, to one year. That is a Labour Government delivering for the people of this country.

There is, however, a need to make further reforms to our welfare system. A total of 1.2 million people have been helped through the new deal, including lone parents, young people and disabled people. I believe that the new deal has worked well for the people of this country. I remember that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley and I were first campaigning, people used to talk about skivvy schemes. They used to talk about young people being taken off the dole, given a programme for a short period and then being put back on the dole. No one describes the new deal like that, and I urge both Opposition parties to drop their rejection of it. It is a good programme delivering real opportunities to people who need them, and it should have received our wholehearted support in the House.

Reform of the public services and the welfare state is one theme of the Queen's Speech. Another focus is on continuing to cut crime, the fear of crime and, in particular, antisocial behaviour. Antisocial behaviour measures have been built up over several years and, in many cases, work well. I remind the House that there have been over 90,000 fixed penalty notices and 4,000 antisocial behaviour orders. Hundreds of houses used by drug dealers have been shut and millions of pounds of their assets have been seized. There are an extra 13,000 police and 5,000 community support officers. The new legislation will crack down on imitation firearms and target knife crime and binge drinking. It will tighten antisocial behaviour laws and give the police new powers to tackle drug dealing. In addition to the record numbers of police, there will be a further 20,000 community support officers. When we first introduced CSOs, they were a bone of contention in the House and were opposed by many hon. Members. Again, I hope that all parties now accept the contribution that they make and will support them.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Does the Prime Minister believe that he made a mistake by reclassifying cannabis?

The Prime Minister: We have asked for advice from the misuse of drugs professional panel, and we expect to receive it in the next couple of weeks. If it advises us to change that decision, we will do so. If it does not, we will obviously have to consider that. However, I believe that the most important thing that we can do is to support the measures that we have already introduced on crime and drugs and the measures that we are going to introduce on violent crime. I hope that we will receive the support of people such as the hon. Gentleman and, for once, the Liberal Democrats on tough measures to deal with crime.

In addition, we will continue to invest in our young people, who need places to go and things to do. We will expand the youth service, sport in schools, Sure Start and the inner city new deal. Let us be clear, however—we can, and will, put a visible uniformed presence back on our streets. People want that visible uniformed presence on our streets. We can and will give the police new powers. We can invest more in our young people, but bringing a proper sense of respect and responsibility to others is not the job of Government and Parliament alone. Parents, local communities and local people must join law makers and law enforcers to make a difference. I believe that we all know what we want in the House. It is completely unacceptable that law-abiding people should be in fear of a lawless minority. It is time to reclaim the streets for the decent majority, and all of us in Parliament and in the country should work to that end.

Today's asylum figures show how much progress has been made in sorting out the system. The number of monthly applications is now at its lowest level since March 1997, but there is much more to do. New immigration laws will strengthen our protection against abuse while protecting our country's deserved reputation as a place of tolerance and help for those in need. Measures taken already—for example, in respect of bogus marriages and non-existent student colleges—are yielding results. The points system for working and tougher penalties for illegal trafficking in people will also help. However, I reject quotas for asylum or immigration. In the case of asylum, they are unfair. In the case of immigration, they are unworkable. Not once during the election campaign could the Conservatives properly explain how they would work.

Long term, the solution is identity cards. By 2008, we will need to have biometric passports because of the United States and the European Union moving towards biometric visa requirements. In addition, we need ID cards as soon as possible for foreign nationals entering Britain on more than a short-term visa. Any ID card scheme will take time to set up. It is essential that we begin now. It is a manifesto commitment and we will honour it. I urge other parties to think carefully before opposing what is necessary for our security, to combat

[The Prime Minister]

fraud and to tackle illegal immigration, and a measure that the new technology makes the obvious policy for security in the times in which we live.

This is a busy legislative programme focused absolutely on the priorities set by the British people. Other issues include reform of the fraud laws, measures to combat the compensation culture, a Bill outlawing incitement to religious hatred in the same way as racial hatred is dealt with, regulatory reform, the new EU accession Bill and the new equality commission. Of course, if we are successful in our bid to host the 2012 Olympics, a Bill to ensure that that happens will be brought before the House, and I am sure that it will have the support of the whole House.

The Queen's Speech protects traditional universal public services free at the point of use, but insists that with the extra investment must come the modernisation that today's patients, parents and pupils demand. It provides for a welfare state that helps those in need, but insists that those who can work do so. It takes forward the agenda on law and order that has seen antisocial behaviour legislation introduced and more police and community support officers and it sends a clear signal that we want a modern society in Britain free from the old prejudices, but with the rules, order and proper respect due to each other as equal citizens. It enables us to have the immigration that our economy needs, but properly controlled with a system that is fair and compassionate.

Compare Britain in 1997 and Britain in 2005—our economy stronger and 2 million more jobs, our public services improving, crime falling, poverty cut and opportunity increased. If we use our presidency of the G8 in the right way, we can help to make poverty history in Africa. I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe that we should always pay tribute to and support our armed forces wherever they are in the world and most particularly now in Iraq. There is a lot to do, but much progress has been made in the past eight years. The Queen's Speech shows the Government's renewed energy, purpose and ambition to build on the achievements so far and to move faster and further in the direction that the country wants, in our public services, in reform of our welfare state and in tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. That is what the country voted for, and I commend it to the House.

3.52 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members please leave the Chamber quietly?

Mr. Kennedy: It is my pleasure to join in the congratulations to the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron). Together with the leader of the Conservative party and the Prime Minister, we both joined in the class of '83, and a very good intake it was that year, when we all look back. Through both personal and parliamentary acquaintance over the past 22 years, I know the integrity that the right hon. Gentleman has brought to politics. From the evidence that I submitted during the previous Parliament, I also know of his studious, sustained and important work as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I pay warm tribute to him.

In the course of his remarks, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned a new Conservative Member who had been a former opponent of his. It turns out that the hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird), who also spoke, was a former Labour opponent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). Indeed, my right hon. Friend has pointed out to me that there are now four Members of the House who were former opponents of his—two Labour and two Conservative. We congratulate them. At this general election my right hon. Friend had the unique experience of one of his former Labour opponents from days gone by becoming his defeated Conservative opponent. If we are looking for a barometer of who may or may not move on, or who may move elsewhere completely and still not move on in British politics, Berwick-upon-Tweed is clearly that barometer.

As the Prime Minister made a humorous personal reference to his domestic circumstances, perhaps I might just be allowed one personal word of my own. I say thank you to the Prime Minister, to the Conservative party leader and to the many personal friends from all parties on both sides of the House who, during the course of the campaign, have been so kind and generous privately to my wife and myself with the arrival of our first born.

That was one arrival, but today marks another. This is the biggest intake at a general election in the Liberal tradition in British politics for over 80 years—and what a welcome arrival it is. It will add to the health and quality of debate in the House in the Parliament ahead. When we look at the plethora of proposed legislation before us and remind ourselves that it was only a few short months ago that the previous comprehensive Queen's speech was introduced, with 37 possible items of legislation—many of which had to be cut short because of the likely date of the election that we had all anticipated, and which most of us knew would never reach the statute book—and also remember that the Government had a three-figure majority before this election, the experience of the past few months makes the case strongly for fixed-term Parliaments to ensure that so much legislative time is not squandered on legislation that then has to be reintroduced, which is exactly what is happening now.

There is another wider reflection that is not just for Liberal Democrats. It has already been a matter of some discussion within both the Labour party and the Conservative party, and quite rightly in the latter case as the party that out-polled the Government in England at this general election. The Government secured only 36 per cent. of the votes cast and a little over a quarter of those able to vote. Surely there is a lesson for us all here, because each and every party now must reflect on the fact that to greater or lesser extents we are competing minorities across the country.

That has one important implication. Since 1947, the House of Lords has operated the Salisbury convention, which recognises that back then, nearly 60 years ago, there was a majority Labour Government but an overwhelmingly Conservative hereditary-dominated

House of Lords. Hence that convention to respect a mandate from a Government elected in this House, even though they could not command a majority in the other House. It is worth reminding ourselves that compared with this election, in those days the Labour majority in this House was 146, supported by 48 per cent. of the popular vote cast at that election. What a far cry from where we find ourselves today in this House—but also what a far cry from the position that the Prime Minister has set up in the other House, because now, for the first time in history, Labour is the largest single party in the House of Lords and the hereditary element has rightly been largely eroded and may yet be completely withdrawn.

The Government should not, particularly on bitterly contentious items such as Lords reform and identity cards, fall back on such an inadequate basis of election here to force through that legislation and expect the House of Lords to be acquiescent. It is absolutely ridiculous that this Government should now fall back on a 60-year-old convention relating to absolutely different political circumstances in order to justify the contents of today's Queen's Speech.

The second and related issue is, of course, the voting system itself. I mentioned the experience in England of the Conservatives, but despite out-polling Labour in England they have no representation in any of the major English cities outside London. Is that healthy for the geographical representation of the body politic? The result of this election yet again underlines that first-past-the-post voting in this day and age is a redundant system that belongs to a redundant age of British politics. British society is more fluid and party allegiances are much less fixed, and our society as a whole is more aspirational as a result. Therefore, the time has surely come to revisit—as the Prime Minister promised but reneged on when first elected Prime Minister—the whole issue of voting reform in this country. It is no longer a question, as in days gone by, of just those in the Liberal tradition feeling particularly hard done by; there are now losers in every party and in every part of the country. That is why the duty is surely on us all to look at this issue afresh.

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of proportional representation. It is clear from the election result that many Labour voters actually voted Liberal. How can it be fair, honest or right that there be proportional representation, when such a switch of votes would lead back to a Labour Government with a Liberal element?

Mr. Kennedy: In the closing stages of the campaign—to be fair to the Prime Minister, during last week's press conference at No. 10 he was unusually candid on this matter—the Prime Minister was urging people not to be tempted into voting Liberal Democrat because they might end up with a Conservative Government. If I had been in his shoes—at the end of eight years in office that were buttressed by three-figure majorities, and in the closing stages of a campaign in which he was seeking this historic Labour third term—I would have had something a bit more positive and persuasive to put to the public than the argument, "Don't vote for that lot, even though you don't like me and us, because you might end up with somebody even more to your disliking." What kind of contortion and absolute distortion of people's votes is that?

I come now to some of the headline legislation before us today. We will certainly maintain our consistent and principled opposition to a system of compulsory national identity cards. We have been through many of these arguments before and we look forward very happily—particularly in the light of a reduced Labour majority—to replaying those arguments and to seeing how attention to them may have shifted with opinion in the parliamentary Labour party and, indeed, in the wider country.

Our views on health, education and benefit reform were set out at the general election. We need to look closely at the legislation before us, but it is clear that there are differences between the parties over the shape of the required reform. We oppose the imposition of top-up fees and tuition fees on our students. I heard the hon. and learned Member for Redcar speak movingly and sincerely about her ability to get up the ladder of social opportunity. I simply ask her and her colleagues this question: to what extent has that ladder been pulled up behind us, away from the current generation whom we are trying to help?

We also oppose the centralisation of targets in the health service, which, as we argued during the election, is distorting clinical priorities; indeed, there is agreement on this issue in many respects. We also continue to favour reducing class sizes in our schools and the accompanying boost to the teaching profession. We are all for diversity in the provision of quality public services. However, what most of us realised during the campaign is that real choice means people knowing that they can receive for themselves and their families at the point of need—and based on need, not ability to pay—quality local provision, whether it be at the school, the hospital or whatever. That is preferable to the false idea of having massive choice, which really involves travel, complexity and all the rest of it, and it is certainly the approach that we shall continue to advocate.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): What advice would the right hon. Gentleman consider appropriate for reforming the health service in England on the basis of the Scottish example, where the Liberal Democrats are in government but waiting times are up?

Mr. Kennedy: My advice to the hon. Gentleman, given that we have all been through the democratic experience, is that the Liberal Democrats, who are in the coalition Executive in Scotland, must be doing something right because they are now, for the first time ever in a general election, second in Scotland. I am also delighted to say that the Scottish National party, like Plaid Cymru in Wales, is emphatically down—*[Interruption.]* I am going to move on, Mr. Speaker.

The issue of terrorism was highly contentious both here and in the other place in the run-up to the election, but I know that this Parliament is going to return to anti-terror legislation. We all understand why there was a partisan atmosphere in the run-up to the election, but I nevertheless hope that, when we revisit the legislation, it may yet prove possible to establish an all-party consensus on the matter. Such a consensus must surely

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[Mr. Kennedy]

remain true to the principles that several of us argued for in the last Parliament—not least the principle that key decisions about individual liberty should never be in the hands of an over-mighty Executive, but should remain under long-established judicial control. At the same time, we have to balance that alongside the continuing need to be vigilant about combating terrorism.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us how negative and partisan it was to spend the entire election complaining that Labour and the Conservatives were fighting negative campaigns?

Mr. Kennedy: I was simply responding to consumer questioning on that matter. To be fair to the right hon. Gentleman, although I am about a million miles removed from most of his opinions, I pay tribute to him as a parliamentarian who is often a generator of fresh thinking and ideas, which he puts forward for public debate. I would encourage him to continue to do so, as I believe that it also helps the Liberal Democrats on many occasions.

There is another area in which it is vital to re-establish what was a long-standing all-party consensus until the Conservatives arbitrarily broke it when they were in government. I refer to long-term pensions policy. By definition, such policy should be something on which the individual citizen can rely with a degree of certainty, irrespective of the vagaries of elections and which parties find themselves in office. When we see the further report of Adair Turner later this year, I hope that it will be possible to return to a sane debate in which Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats work together, as happened in the early 1970s after years of dispute. It should be possible for us to revisit that and have a more co-ordinated and less disjointed approach.

Penultimately, there is local taxation reform, on which we advanced positive views during the election. They proved controversial—much criticised by some, warmly applauded by others, which is what elections should be about.

Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Kennedy: I shall carry on, if the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

It is clear that the Government will return later this year to the funding of local government and I hope to see a more informed debate based on sensible proposals rather than a rejection of each and every idea that comes from every other quarter than the Government's. The Conservative party introduced the council tax and the Labour Government will have to reform it. They know as well as anyone else how deeply unpopular and regressive that tax is, and it is clearly not sustainable. The Conservatives introduced it only in response to the complete and hideous shambles that was the poll tax, which led to the demise of their leader at the time.

The poll tax and the council tax followed on from the old rating system. That, too, was completely unsustainable, but had been supported by both Labour and Conservative Governments. Therefore, I shall take no lectures from people who presided over such a mess in respect of local taxation. That is why I shall continue to make the case for a local income tax.

Tom Clarke: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kennedy: I am sorry, no.

My final point has to do with Britain's role in the world. There was, rightly, much discussion of the Iraq issue during the election campaign. We remain of the view that we should be planning a responsible and phased withdrawal of our troops from Iraq, not just in this Parliament but in this calendar year.

There were obvious controversies and leaks during the campaign, but I regret that we did not have a broader discussion of Britain's role in the world. Whatever happens in the French referendum to be held in a week or two, this Parliament is bound to be dominated by the European debate, and correctly so. It is time for us to make a positive case for Europe—one that engages and persuades the public. Those. Members of all parties who had informal contact in the previous Parliament must work as never before. Moreover, the Government must be seen to be heavily engaged in the argument. We must go out and make the positive case for Europe and ensure a yes vote in whatever referendum comes down the track. The pro-European parties secured 58 per cent. of all the votes cast in the election. That is very encouraging, but we must be prepared to build on it.

The outcome of the election confirmed one of the developments of recent years in politics. There is a need for the Liberal voice to be heard in party politics, in Parliament and in public on many of the issues that face us today. The Labour Government won only a marginal mandate, but they want to introduce illiberal measures. They can be assured that they will receive a Liberal response from those on these Benches—and that that will be good for the quality of our politics as a whole.

4.12 pm

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Mr. Speaker, to be called so early in the debate, and to follow the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy). He spoke about proportional representation, which was not mentioned in the Labour manifesto. The Government have made no commitment in that regard, and the subject did not appear in the Queen's Speech. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had reneged on his commitment to proportional representation, but he will remember that my right hon. Friend set up a commission under the late Lord Jenkins to look into the matter. That commission produced a very good report, but it did not lead anywhere.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber for finishing his speech on the high note of Europe. I want to make that the most important element of my contribution, given the commitment in the Queen's Speech to a debate on the referendum in the first instance, which will be followed by the appropriate legislation and then the referendum itself. The Leader of the Opposition called for a date for that referendum. We

do not yet have that date, but I have no doubt that the referendum will be held, regardless of the outcome of similar procedures in any other European country.

I turn now to the royal prerogative, which used to mean that no treaty was required to be approved by Parliament or the people of this country. However, the Government passed the royal prerogative to this House when we agreed to go to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. We are now to go still further, by passing the royal prerogative to the people of our country, who will decide in a referendum whether to ratify the European constitution treaty. The right hon. Anthony Benn—or Wedgwood Benn, or Tony Benn, however he wishes to be called—will be very pleased about that. He has argued for many years against the use of the royal prerogative in respect of wars or treaties. This Government have passed the royal prerogative to the people themselves, and that is a very interesting development.

Simon Hughes: Does the hon. Gentleman support the view of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, given during the election, that the royal prerogative should be given up completely in relation to decisions about war, and a decision always made by Parliament? Does he support our view that the use of the royal prerogative should cease completely and that treaties and decisions about war and peace should be made by Parliament, not the Executive?

Sir Stuart Bell: Yes. I agree with the Chancellor and with the proposition that the hon. Gentleman has put forward. Clearly, if the royal prerogative were passed to Parliament on the question of war and if we pass the royal prerogative to the people on the question of the treaty, it could never go back again. That is a development in our constitution that we should all welcome. The right hon. Anthony Wedgwood Benn—Tony Benn—would, as I said, welcome that more than anyone.

The destiny of the treaty establishing a constitution for Europe is in the hands of United Kingdom citizens. When the referendum comes, they will have an important decision to make. That decision will affect not only this generation, but generations yet unborn. Mr. Speaker earlier urged us to have a careful debate and to be polite among ourselves as we discuss points with care and interest. When it comes to the European debate, we ought to be careful with the facts and to ensure that we have a proper debate that can go out to the country so that the country can make its decision. As the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said, some 58 per cent. of those who voted in the general election voted for parties in favour of a yes vote.

There have been references to the 1983 election from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), from the Leader of the Opposition and from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. We fought that election on a manifesto that called for peace, jobs and freedom. As *The Guardian* succinctly, if drily, said, that was better than fighting for war, the dole and slavery. If we think about the history of our continent over the past 60 years, however, we can see that we have lived in peace from one end of it to the other, apart from the difficulties in Northern Ireland—I am glad to see the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) in his place—and on the eastern front in Kosovo and such places. We have had peace in Europe, and that is due in no small measure to the fact that the European nation states wished to come together, did come together and have stayed together ever since. We tend to overlook the fact that the continent was riven by war for 1,000 years, and I ask any Member who cannot sleep at night to dip into Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", where he or she will find that for many generations before nation states existed, tribes in Europe were also involved in warfare.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a passionate European who has fought the European cause for as long as he has been in Parliament. Does he take the point made by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy), that we should gear up for the referendum campaign? It is not just a question of having debates in the House. The Government have to lead a proactive campaign in the country if we are to win the referendum, if it comes next year.

Sir Stuart Bell: I may, I think, commit the Government to there being a referendum next year, regardless of the outcome of the French referendum. The 25 nation states in Europe must make up their minds, and it is not a question of one saying no and the rest of us turning tail on the European treaty. A decision will have to come to the British people, but my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) makes a valid point. In France, the treaty has been sent to every French household. It is a very lengthy treaty, but that was an important thing to do. For a while, it became a bestseller in stores. When that happened, the no vote became a yes vote in the opinion polls. My contribution today, following as it does the contribution of the leader of the Liberal Democrats, is the beginning of a campaign, in so far as we can engineer a campaign. Clearly, though, the campaign must be Government led, and it is a matter of some regret that the Conservative Opposition maintain their opposition to the European Union, even though it was a Conservative Prime Minister in 1972 who took us in. It was Baroness Thatcher who, in 1986, signed up to the Single European Act, and it must astonish the people of our country that a party that used to be so pro-Europe has become less European now.

I often like to quote a line of poetry to the House, and today it is:

"And see how dark the backward stream
A little moment passed so smiling."

We spend much of our time on events that happened a long time ago. It is proper and right that we should celebrate the 60th anniversary of the ending of the war in Europe and, in July, the ending of the war in Japan. I often wonder whether it is proper and right that we should celebrate Trafalgar day 200 years after that battle. [HON. MEMBERS: "Absolutely."] Well, Opposition Members will be heartened to learn that the people of Orleans in France have just celebrated the 576th anniversary of the liberation of the city by Joan of Arc and her defeat of the English, with no less a personage than the president of the National Assembly in attendance. We are not alone in looking back to a long-gone but not forgotten past. The point about such

[Sir Stuart Bell]

commemorations and celebrations is that they remind us how Europe was riven by wars for century after century. That is no longer the case, and the peoples of Europe can come together to live in peace and harmony, and to reach their own personal destinies.

Our 1983 manifesto concentrated on peace, jobs and freedom, as I have said, and great play is made today of the unemployment rates in France, Germany and Italy. In fact, we have 72.9 per cent. of our citizens in work. In Germany, it is 64.6 per cent, in France 61.9 per cent. and in Italy 56.2 per cent. We trade among ourselves and we take in each other's washing, and the consequences for our prosperity can be seen from Ireland to Portugal and Spain, and as far as Greece. It is no wonder that 10 more nation states have now joined the European Union. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley referred to Bulgaria and Romania, and three other nation states also wish to join the European Union, in the interests of their people and to give them the prosperity that we have enjoyed.

I am reminded of the point made by John Fitzgerald Kennedy when he said that all boats lift on a rising tide. The prosperity from trade and job creation brings prosperity to all our people and we should welcome the chance to share it. We live in a global economy. We cannot get away from China, India or the US. We have to be able to work together to improve our markets and to participate in the world market. That is why the European Union is so significant.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) referred to Teesport and a new deep-sea container port is proposed for Teesside, which will bring enormous benefits to the Tees valley and the north-east. It would provide some 500 jobs and could create 6,000 to 7,000 new jobs indirectly over the next few years. That development is on the back of the European Union and the trade it brings.

I mentioned the backward stream, and we are proud of the Bill of Rights of 1688. However, the treaty that we are to debate in the House and in the country will establish a constitution for Europe and a charter of fundamental rights. That will cover many of the points that have been made today.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar referred to the right to dignity for the elderly and to respect, as did the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister. That is in the declaration of human rights, which is part of the treaty.

The treaty also refers to the right of persons with disability to enjoy the right to social and occupational integration; to the rights of the child; to the right to choose an occupation, engage in work, conduct a business and conclude a contract and to the right to move freely within the territory. The treaty provides for a post of Minister for Foreign Affairs, merging the roles of the high representative for foreign affairs and the external relations commissioner. All that will maintain and build on the peace in Europe that we have enjoyed for 60 years and will provide a framework for dialogue with other states in the world.

An important and significant part of the work of the Chamber over the next year will be to hold a proper debate on Europe. It must be a debate, not a battle. It should be based on the facts, which will be put to the British public in the referendum, when it comes. The debate must take into account the interests of present and future generations. It is in the interests of our country that there be a yes vote in the referendum. We should carry it through the House of Commons and hold the debate, and for years and years to come the British people will be better for it.

4.26 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Prime Minister revelled in his third victory. My colleagues congratulate him on his victory, but the language he must use and the tone he must strike should be different from triumphalist language.

When we consider the results of the general election, each of the three parties with more than 10 Members of Parliament can say that it did well. Labour can say it did well because it won the election even though it lost many seats. The Lib Dems can say they did well because they have learned how to move left of the Labour party and have started to take seats from Labour in urban areas. The Conservatives can say that we did well because we won more seats than any other party. We showed that we were effective challengers for power. We took more of the popular vote in England than the Labour Government.

We all know, however, that each party also did badly by comparison with its ambitions. I am sure that the Labour party would far rather have a strong mandate throughout England as well as in Scotland and Wales. It would like to feel that it had the endorsement of many more people. Perhaps the most shocking statistic from the election, which provides the backdrop to the Gracious Speech, is that four in 10 voters thought it better to vote for nobody at all, because we, collectively, had not interested them, and that only just over one in five thought it worth while voting for either the Labour party or the principal alternative, the Conservative party.

Labour must feel worried that it is only by a quirk of the distribution of constituency boundaries in the electoral system that it is in such a strong position in the House of Commons, with an overall majority and possible support from some of the leftward-inclined parties on a number of crucial issues. We know that Labour owes a lot to the fact that several Labour constituencies have few constituents, so it was much easier for a Labour candidate to be elected than it was for a Conservative or a Liberal Democrat. Labour knows, too, that the forthcoming boundary review will go some way to righting the gross injustice in the current electoral system whereby the average Labour Member of Parliament represents several thousand fewer voters than the average Conservative Member.

For the next four or five years, the Labour Government will have to govern not just against the welcome pressure of questioning and scepticism from their own Back Benches—at last Government Back Benchers are beginning to take the role that has been traditional on both sides of the House, whoever was in power—but against the background of knowing that it

will be easy for them to lose their overall majority at the next general election and that the Boundary Commission is already making important decisions. Even if Labour took the same percentage of the vote, such decisions mean that it could come close to losing the election, if those conditions were recreated.

It is extraordinary that a Government with a good majority could have achieved that on only 36 per cent. of the vote, and that that in turn was based on a low turnout of around only 60 per cent. So when I was listening to the Prime Minister I was looking for a little more understanding. He told us that he had learned lessons from the election, but when I went through what he was saying and the contents of the Gracious Speech, I wondered whether that was true.

What were the electors trying to tell us all? Well, first they were trying to tell us that they do not like the political show very much any more, conducted by any of us. The audience are leaving the theatre. We can see that today, when we have a small, very welcome and, I am sure, very distinguished audience in the Public Gallery, but it has not been full even for the first day of the Queen's Speech debate. We see the same thing when talking to journalists; the attention span of the media for what politicians have to say is getting narrower and narrower, their interest in controversy and extreme language greater and greater. They do not seem, as they interpret their audiences, to be willing to engage in a more rounded debate that some of us would like to conduct inside the House and out, so that people could understand politics better.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend give any credence to what a small business man said to me at the weekend, when talking about the election? He regretted that there had not been a Conservative victory, but he said, "There really was not much difference between you all, was there?" Does my right hon. Friend agree that one difficulty for voters, which may have contributed to their reluctance to participate, as he has highlighted, is that they simply did not see sufficient substantial or convincing differences, at least between the two major parties, to be bothered to make a choice?

Mr. Redwood: There is some truth in that. The way I would put it is that as Conservatives identified important issues that did matter a lot to the public, such as choice in public services, or the problems of immigration control, or the problems of how to police and whether we needed more police, we saw the Labour party counter, because it used similar polling and similar research and decided that that research was good, so it crafted soundbites and possible policies for the Labour Government during the pre-election and election period, and that seemed to be going on to our territory. One of the reasons why the public feel so let down by the last eight years, or perhaps a little longer than that in truth, and why they are becoming extremely sceptical about politicians' claims, is that they see clever people at the top of the Labour party crafting language that has some Conservative elements in it, but then they discover that the Government do not deliver on it, because that language does not agree with the instincts and genuine worries and concerns of many Labour Members of Parliament.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I have followed many of the right hon. Gentleman's arguments and have been impressed by his intellectual approach, while never necessarily supporting his conclusions. Is not the problem that in this analysis, as in many other analyses, he is revealing that he is part of a very small political class? When pundits become the people who are questioned, and pop stars make the front pages—when, for example, this morning, Kylie Minogue's illness was the first item on the BBC news, although I hear that she is a very good singer and has many fans—it may be that what we are about in this place has little relevance for many young people and others. We should think about how to reach those people by other means.

Mr. Redwood: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The media may well be very faithful to the interests of the people that they are serving. I would not want to criticise that news judgment. It shows that we all have a very big task: to make the political theatre more interesting again, and to do so in a way that can inform the public better.

I found in Wokingham that an intelligent audience for the election were actually engaged and interested in the issues, and they were extremely frustrated by what was coming across on the national news media. They felt that a tabloid election was being served up in rather unpleasant tones, and conducted in that way as a result of all the parties combined with the media, in the way that that mêlée sometimes works. I made very slow progress around the streets talking to people, because they wanted so much information. They wanted to make an informed choice about the policies and ideas on offer, and that information simply was not available through the debate that we had been able to conduct and the way that it had been presented through the media.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I am listening to the right hon. Gentleman with great interest, as ever, and I am enjoying his analysis. Is not an alternative interpretation of what is going on that the people are disillusioned not with British politics, but with two-party politics? Given that, as he says, there is an evident convergence between the Conservatives and the Labour party, what would spice up politics in the way that he describes is a serious recognition of the fact that we now live in a three-party environment, where two parties got a third of the vote each and the Liberal Democrats got a quarter. Is he therefore willing to entertain the prospect that the answer to his own conundrum is the fact that we should now recognise that we are living in a three-party society?

Mr. Redwood: The Liberal Democrat party is ill-advised to draw me on that subject. In every race that I have seen around the country, they always try to make out that it is a two-horse race, however incredible that may be given their position, and some of the most mendacious leaflets that I have seen come from those who want to make it a two-horse race, when only one of them is a serious runner. If the Liberal Democrats really

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want to be part of this analysis, it would help a great deal if they would stand by the policies and ideas that they put on to the public record through their Liberal Democrat policy documents and their comments in *Hansard.*

One of the extraordinary features of the general election was that, when some of us decided that we would like to talk about Liberal Democrat policy to inform our electors of what they were up to, it was the Liberal Democrats who immediately wanted to close down any debate about that and came up with a strange doctrine that anything that a Liberal Democrat spokesman had said or written throughout the four years of the last Parliament did not count—the magic words—unless it was part of their very slim manifesto document. They would never let us get away with that. Everything that we or the Labour party say and do is regarded as relevant, yet the Liberal Democrats think that they have special dispensation to be out of the normal debate. If that is the Liberal Democrats' approach, it will make debate in the House very easy because we can ignore anything that they say for four years and tell them that we are waiting for their manifesto, as that will tell us what they intend to defend.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): On that very theme, the right hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that the Liberal Democrat group on Ceredigion district council recently voted against local income tax.

Mr. Redwood: How wise they were, and I am sure that the leader of the Liberal Democrat party wished that he had voted against local income tax, too—or perhaps he did when the policy came up for discussion and he lost.

Lembit Öpik *rose—*

Mr. Redwood: I give way again; I cannot resist it.

Lembit Öpik: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I appeal to the House for some understanding in response to the Plaid Cymru spokesperson's incorrect attack, given the fact that Plaid Cymru has sunk to being the third party of Wales, and the hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that the Liberal Democrats are now the official Opposition in Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: Yes, but the hon. Gentleman does not deny what I have said.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. We will now get back to the debate on the Queen's Speech.

Mr. Redwood: You are very wise, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I willingly accept your ruling.

The Gracious Speech adopts certain Conservative language on some crucial policies. Naturally, I welcome the Prime Minister's conversion to the idea that choice, quality, differentiation and diversity are important matters for educational improvement. I look forward to seeing how many of his right hon. and hon. Friends he can carry with him in the Lobby if he decides to put those issues to the test. However, one of the big let-downs in British politics in the past few years is Labour's mantra that cash will be allied to reform, but we have not seen proper reform.

We have seen a massive over-centralisation and a huge increase in targets and bureaucracy. We have seen teachers, nurses and doctors driven mad to distraction by having to fill in forms instead of looking after their charges and by having to deviate from doing what they would like to do—teaching well, or looking after their patients in the best manner—to deal with the priorities imposed by a centralised bureaucracy, sometimes driven by Ministers and sometimes seemingly acting without a great deal of ministerial direction of any kind. Sometimes, if we challenge Ministers, we are told that they will look into things, as though they had absolutely nothing to do with them. Sometimes we think that they may not have anything to do with Ministers: they look very surprised by what the bureaucracy had been doing in their names. On other occasions, they are more honourable and say, "Yes, of course, we as Ministers are responsible", and suggest that they will make some changes.

I will believe that the Prime Minister is a true convert to the cause of proper reform when I see the moves that I think he needs to make. He needs to strip out many of those central targets and bureaucracy, and he needs to say that popular schools will be able to expand and that parents will have a genuine choice of school and that the resources and the wherewithal will be made available so that that choice is realistic and their children have a good chance of getting into the school that has been chosen. He also needs to stop his party threatening or menacing the grammar schools.

One of the most disappointing features of the Labour Government over the past eight years has been the decline of social mobility. One would think that Labour—which, like the Conservatives, wants opportunity for people from poor backgrounds—would be a champion of ways in which people could exercise their rights and could achieve greater social mobility. We heard poignant stories at the start of this debate about people who had managed to move upwards from humble beginnings. Many of us on the Opposition Benches did not start with anything, and the way in which we were able to move upwards was often through educational opportunity at a grammar school or, in my case, a direct grant school where I was able to win a free place. That system was abolished by a previous Labour Government and that school is now independent, so people from the background that I came from are no longer able to go to that school and to enjoy the greater opportunity to go on to a good university and make progress. I do not know whether we all regard getting to the House of Commons as making progress, but there are many who still do. I regard it as a great privilege to be in this place, and I am very conscious of the role that education played in enabling me and many others to get here.

The Prime Minister must be serious about allowing different types of schools and about backing and supporting the schools of excellence that are often the subject of jealous attack from some members of his party. He needs to be serious about stripping away the centralisation and urge to control and intervene that have done so much damage to our schooling and part of our health care under this Government so far.

I also look forward to seeing how the Prime Minister intends to buttress his policy of harnessing the private sector's role in the provision of better health care. I think that the important thing about the national health service, which brings together many people and has traditionally united the main parties since the post-war settlement, is the principle that all those who need treatment can get it free at the point of use. It is quite wrong to say that they are getting it free, because all of us are paying very dearly for health care. Very often those who receive it have, over the years, paid many times more than the cost of the health care that they finally need.

I have described the important principle and we have no ideological hang-up about how the pledge is met. Any sensible person would want it to be met in the most efficient way so that people can access care quickly and in the best way so that the outcome of the treatment or care is the best possible. If the Prime Minister is serious about that interpretation—a more Conservative interpretation than his party has traditionally gone in for—I will very willingly support him. I am sure that all my right hon. and hon. Friends feel the same. I have a sneaking suspicion, however, that he is not going to carry that reform forward in the way that he claims he will because there will be political difficulties in his party and because I do not think that he can draw himself away from all the targets, bureaucracy and regulation that are the hallmarks of this Government and in which he is so deeply immersed.

The Government have also, rather late in the day, become a convert to the idea of less regulation. It was some months ago that the Prime Minister boldly announced that for every new regulation that the Government introduced, one would be removed. It was a very crude approach to deregulation, because regulations are not units of account. It would be possible for the Prime Minister to meet his target by introducing a very expensive regulation such as the recent one on the limitation of overtime and by taking out an old-fashioned and cheap one. He could then say that he had met his target and he would at least have stuck to what he said he was going to do. However, in the past few months since he made his statement, I do not find that he has struck off many regulations but that many regulations are still being introduced.

In the Gracious Speech, we are promised legislation to make it easier to remove unnecessary and undesirable regulations, but in the words that the Government crafted for Her Majesty we are not actually promised real deregulation. It is well beyond the time when we should just be discussing that process or the idea. If the Government are serious about wishing to undo some of the many mistakes that they have made by over-regulating and interfering too much, they need legislation this Session that will remove a sizeable amount of regulation from the statute book.

There are many examples of regulations that achieve the opposite of what they set out to do, or fail to do anything along the lines of what was intended. The Government must know about that because they have introduced and supervised many such regulations, so I urge them to beef up the Bill and make it a more serious contribution, if they really think that they have learned the lesson from the electorate.

My view of the electoral mood in the many places that I visited before the general election and during the campaign itself was that people were conscious, as consumers, that when they bought something, they usually got good product information and some sort of after-sales services, and that if things went wrong, they got redress. When it comes to government, however, which is the biggest thing that they buy—they have no choice about that because they must buy it—they find that there is not a proper after-sales services. Measures often do not do what the product information purports to say. There is often little product information of any kind and people find it difficult to get redr[illegible]

That is why many people are heartily sick of all of us and the political theatre. They begin to think that all there is is political theatre and that Parliament does not engage with the lack of value, responsiveness and accountability that they find day by day when they discover that they cannot get appointments with their doctors on time, that they cannot get their operations on time, that their children do not get the teaching in schools that they think they deserve, that there is not the discipline in schools that they think is needed, that police do not respond as quickly as they would like to serious crimes in the neighbourhood, or that policemen are not seen on the beat when casual violence or yobbish behaviour is under way. All our constituents witness those failings from time to time, but that does not seem to produce a response here in the elected Parliament that drags the Government to account and gets them to make things work better for the enormous amount spent.

The constituents of all hon. Members pay on average £4 out of every £10 that they earn in taxation, although they often do not see that happening. For example, if they are lucky enough still to be able to buy petrol for 80p a litre—it is now usually a bit more than that at the pump—60p of that 80p is tax that goes straight to the Government. When people buy a product or service that has VAT on it, 17.5 per cent. goes straight to the Government. People can see obvious deductions from their income due to income tax and large deductions due to council tax because that annual bill makes them aware of how much the Government can take.

If the Queen's Speech is seriously to help Parliament and the Government to re-engage with the electorate, we must start from the proposition that the public are not getting value, do not think that they are getting value and feel that the Government are not responding to their worries about the way in which services are delivered and money is spent. All of us need to lift our game and show that Parliament can be incisive and cause the Government to provide better and more responsive services because people will otherwise continue to leave the political theatre.

4.48 pm

Ms Celia Barlow (Hove) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech. To be able to do so on the day after being presented to the House, and on the day of the Queen's Speech, is indeed an honour. I promised the people of Hove and Portslade that I would waste no time in taking their concerns and aspirations to the House and the heart of government, so that is what I intend to do. Having said that, I am still unsure of the

[Ms Celia Barlow]

exact route from my office to the Whips Office, but perhaps that, too, could be seen as further service to my constituency.

Hove has been blessed by nature. In addition to being among the sunniest cities on mainland Britain, it enjoys the uninterrupted beauty of the south downs to the north and a wonderful coastal promenade to the south. Ramblers and kitesurfers alike have thus discovered Hove's desirability as a modern city with easy access to outdoor life. I want the best for that way of life as well, which means taking steps to protect our environment. I support measures to create a national park on the south downs, ensuring that future generations may enjoy them as much as we have done. On a local level, I offer my support to council planners and campaigners to encourage new developments that are beacons of environmental sensitivity. The House will also find in me a key proponent of the wider, more global, challenges that need facing up to if we are to stave off the invidious effects of climate change which will blight the lives of many unless we act soon.

It is a particular privilege to make my maiden speech on the day of the Queen's Speech. As the Government begin their third term in office by laying before the people an ambitious legislative agenda, I begin my own, more humble, parliamentary duties. In so doing, I want not to forget just how significant the last two terms have been, and to reflect on exactly how much has been achieved in my constituency since Labour took office.

The 2005 general election was a tough fight, but as far as we were concerned, a principled one. The Opposition, who placed immigration posters in ethnically sensitive areas, cynically used the diversity of our local population for political gain. We, on the other hand, focused our attention on speaking and listening to people on the doorsteps. People shared their concerns about, for example, the insensitive siting of mobile phone masts in residential communities, inappropriate development in suburban areas and the rising cost of housing. I have listened to their concerns, and hope to become the advocate that they deserve.

I was struck by how seldom issues of employment and child care were raised. As a veteran of many previous campaigns, I know how past elections were dominated by the social and economic consequences of joblessness. Hove and Portslade suffered greatly from this disease, but since 1997 they have witnessed an incredible 56 per cent. fall in the rate of unemployment. Had we promised that to the people of Hove and Portslade in 1997, no one would have believed us.

My predecessor, Ivor Caplin, stated in his maiden speech in 1997 that the Chancellor's decision to grant independence to the Bank of England would be shown by history to be the right one. How right he was. The people of my constituency are better educated, better cared for when they are sick, and have more personal freedom than at any previous time. It is on this platform of achievement that we stand proud today, and I look forward to playing my part in this next Session of Parliament, when yet more of Britain's potential will be unlocked for my constituents.

I should also like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to my predecessor, Ivor Caplin. Much symbolism has been assigned to Labour's victory in Hove in 1997, but it would be a mistake to assume that that was merely the result of a national trend. Ivor had been a tireless advocate for the people of Hove for a great number of years and had already set in motion an ambitious programme of rejuvenation for the town. As leader of Hove council before coming to the House, he achieved the rebuilding of the Portland Gate estate, for example. It was his hard work and considerable leadership skills that mobilised the constituency Labour party, and together they communicated the new Labour vision and earned the respect and trust of constituents.

Such focused campaigning achieved many victories for the people of Hove and Portslade, such as the regeneration of the old market into an active community facility and centre for the arts. As many hon. Members here today will know, it is a work ethic that Ivor carried into his parliamentary career, earning him the respect of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

During the recent election campaign, I had the privilege of visiting a mosque in Hove with Ivor, and was deeply moved by the expressions of warmth and gratitude made towards him by people there, as they bid him farewell as their Member of Parliament. That he could sustain a productive and personal relationship with the Muslim community while carrying out his challenging ministerial duties of the time speaks greatly of his abilities as an advocate. Those who underestimated his genuine commitment to every section of the constituency usually paid a price, which might be why the local Respect candidate lost his deposit in the general election.

As I look forward, I see much that can be done to build on Labour's achievements and to make Hove and Portslade an even fairer and more prosperous place in which to live and work. Despite much improvement, there are some pockets of deprivation and social exclusion that need to be tackled. In those areas, I shall continue to forge partnerships with the private sector and providers of public services to ensure that job opportunities and community support are fully extended to those who are most in need.

As the many hon. Friends who came to Hove during the election campaign discovered, Hove today is a modern, vibrant city, ethnically and socially diverse. I support that healthy trend, which is attracting people and companies to my constituency. This week, the world-renowned architect Frank Gehry will visit Hove to further his design proposals for the regeneration of the King Alfred sports centre. The scheme offers a startling opportunity for the people of Hove and Portslade, who will not only take pride in the prestige development, but benefit from its imaginative proposals for environmental and social sustainability. Mr. Gehry's design will give the people of Hove world-class sports facilities and a residential area offering 40 per cent. affordable housing, all of which will cost the taxpayer not a penny. I am especially proud that such a prestigious development in Hove's best seafront location will be fully accessible to every section of our community, not only to the rich and privileged. For that reason, I shall engage positively with the development team to ensure the best possible outcome for all my constituents.

Nowhere is the social fabric of my constituency more evident than in the community-wide campaign for a new stadium at Falmer for Brighton and Hove Albion. I

cannot stress in strong enough terms the passion and pride that my constituents feel for their team and the frustration felt by many at the protracted inquiry into its new home. The process has cost the club £3 million to date, but that has not detracted from the club's extensive community work, particularly with schools and those with special needs. The need to give young people that kind of incentive to participate in sport has never been greater, and enabling the development of the Albion will grant many children in my constituency a healthier lifestyle. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has commented on the passion and good nature of the supporters' campaign. I agree with him wholeheartedly.

I see a new community stadium at Falmer as part of the regeneration of Brighton and Hove and the further strengthening of constituents' pride in their vibrant and inclusive city. I share that pride in my constituency, but stand here today with humility, eager to learn from my hon. Friends how to become the best parliamentarian that my skills will allow and to serve the people of Hove and Portslade to the best of my abilities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, please accept my sincere gratitude for calling me to speak today and for listening to me with such grace.

4.58 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Ms Barlow), who spoke from the very same place from which I made my maiden speech 35 years ago. She might not be encouraged to hear that, but she might at least be encouraged to know that this place does not kill us—we can live through it all and enjoy it even as we become older and, perhaps, wiser.

I am at a disadvantage, in that I cannot enter into the battle of the election that has been fought again in the House today. The Conservative party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats have all fought the battle again, but I have no one to fight with. The Social Democratic and Labour party Members are not here, nor are the Sinn Fein Members—thank God—and the remaining Ulster Unionist party Member. As a result, I am on my own, as it were, with my hon. Friends.

I was reminded by one of my constituents that when I spoke in the House the other day I should have mentioned a little song that they sing sometimes in Ulster about bottles—nine green bottles hanging on the wall. It was suggested to me that I should have said that there were nine bottles but they were not hanging, and that they were not green but orange. Perhaps that sums up the matter.

I was reading Edmund Burke the other day. He was an Irishman who spent his time in this place teaching the English people democracy, so he said. He wrote:

"That which is morally wrong can never be politically right."

That is something that we need to consider in this place.

I come from a province that has been torn asunder by terrorism. I come from a province that lost its democratic structures because this House thought that the way to deal with it was by taking away the democratic structures that it had. They were not perfect. I am sure that many of us think that the structure of this place is not perfect. However, it was the will of the people that put the structures in place. Alas, we have been through momentous years.

I asked for the figures for the three main years of the previous Parliament, given that some parliamentarians think that all the trouble is over and that the peace movement, as it is called, and progress are absolutely successful. In 2002, we had 350 shootings and 188 bombings. Three incendiary devices exploded and there were 120 incidents of attacks by firearms and explosives. There were 312 paramilitary attacks.

In 2003, we had 229 shootings and 77 bombings. There were eight incendiaries and there were 156 finds of explosives and firearms. There were 305 paramilitary attacks. In 2004, we had 185 shootings and 64 bombings. There were 21 incendiaries. There were 90 finds of firearms and explosives and there were 228 paramilitary attacks.

The darkness is still upon us. The murders are still prevalent, as are the killings. I take cognisance of your looks towards me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we have been told that the Government will work to bring about the conditions that are necessary for the restoration of political institutions in Northern Ireland, and it is to that that I am addressing my remarks.

It is all very well for the Government to say that they will deal with terrorism, but they need to start with terrorism in their back yard, which is Northern Ireland. It must be dealt with. There is no use telling our people—I want to make this plain to the House—that we will do our best to rejuvenate the so-called agreement that has failed four times: it was set up, it broke down again and it was broken up. We must go down another road, which must be that no terrorist, whether they come from one side or the other, can be in any Government of any part of this United Kingdom. An ultimatum must be given by the Government that the day of terrorism is over and that people cannot shoot their way into Government office. They cannot murder people, rob banks and destroy their country and then demand that, because they have a mandate, they must get into government. The Prime Minister has promised that. I told the Prime Minister privately that I was a Blairite on that matter. I told him that I was a convinced Blairite, and that I was not changing. There are nine Members from Northern Ireland in the House because of it. The people do not want terrorists in the Government of Northern Ireland, and the time has come for the Government to deal with that.

Today, I talked with an emissary from the American Government, and I have talked to the people representing the south. They, too, must take a stand on that issue. They should unite, then move forward. If people do not want to get on the train of democracy, they will be left behind on the platform. The train of democracy must move forward in Northern Ireland.

It is not morally right for terrorists to be in the Government of Northern Ireland. I should like the House to get to grips with that issue, and the Government to keep the promise made by the Prime Minister, to which he referred when I questioned him in the previous Parliament. He gave an undertaking, and I should like it to be honoured. I should like the other parties in the House to recognise it and realise its importance. There is not a single Member in the House

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

who would like to have the situation that we have in Northern Ireland in their own constituency. I make a plea to the House—let us get to grips with the issue.

Lembit Opik: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his party on what, by any objective analysis, was an impressive performance in Northern Ireland. However, in the spirit of the Queen's Speech, I am sure that he, like everyone else, wants a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Does he accept that it would be right in principle to have an operational devolved Assembly? If that is the case, is he willing to commit his party to seeking negotiations to see if we can find an accommodation with the key players, accepting the very reasonable point that he made about the unacceptable level of underlying violence that still pertains in the Northern Ireland community?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Before the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) replies, I hope that the length of that question will not set a standard for this Parliament.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The answer is simple. These IRA-Sinn Feiners have had that opportunity over and over again. I said at Leeds castle that my party did not, and will not, talk to terrorists, whether they are on the loyalist or Roman Catholic side of the fence, or are from a Unionist or nationalist background. However, while we were talking with the Prime Minister to try to find a way through, and he was negotiating with them, they were planning the bank robbery. Not only were they planning that but, according to the chief of police, they were carrying out recruitments, were writing up a list of men to be shot, and were planning a series of murders and incendiary attacks. They have had their day. This is not a time for talking, and for more lists of deaths, bombings and burnings. It is a day for action. I dispute with my friend, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Opik), the idea that the people of Northern Ireland want negotiations. When I made my last speech in the previous Parliament he condemned me for not speaking to the IRA. The people have spoken, and they have said, "No more talks. They had their chance, and they didn't take it. Right, let's have democracy." I pray that democracy will prevail, and that the House will go back to basics, saying that democracy will prevail everywhere in the United Kingdom.

I say that with the backing not only of Protestant voters, but of Roman Catholic voters and also voters who want a united Ireland eventually but do not want the IRA-Sinn Fein. The IRA-Sinn Fein have been taken on and soundly dealt with by the people of Northern Ireland, and we must move forward without them. They are locking themselves out of the talks, not us. They made the choice. They said, "It's terrorism for us. We're holding on to our guns." We say democracy must and will prevail.

Michael Connarty: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing an intervention. I am an observer. I do not live in Northern Ireland, although I have some relatives there. We talk about democracy. When another party wins a number of seats—Sinn Fein has won a number of seats, as minority parties in other parts of the United Kingdom have won seats—there must clearly be some role for them in the democratic process. I do not talk to Sinn Fein for the same reason as the hon. Gentleman does not—one cannot have militarism and democracy side by side. But at what point in the democratic debate will the hon. Gentleman talk to Sinn Fein?

Rev. Ian Paisley: Let me make it clear that IRA members come to the Assembly. I debate in that Assembly. They do not drive me out of the Assembly. If they came to the House, we would not all leave. We would debate. However, there is a difference between debate and taking people into government. The hon. Gentleman would not take the Tories into his Government, and the Tories are good, respectable, law-abiding citizens. The Labour Members of the Government are good citizens as well. I am giving an illustration; I do not want to be misquoted. The hon. Gentleman would not take the Liberals into government, and I would not blame him. All I can say is, "You get me those who are democrats." There are democrats on the nationalist side. We would share power with them. That has always been our position. We have made that clear. We invited the Social Democratic and Labour party to join us in a voluntary coalition to get the Assembly up and running again.

Our position is clear: no terrorists or terrorist organisations. The Prime Minister has told us that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably related. Those are not my words; they are his. The people in the south of Ireland have been telling us. The Minister for Justice has been telling us that the IRA are a lot of vagabonds, rascals and murderers. Then we are asked to share power with them. I will not be sharing power or talking with them. I have nothing to say to them but "Get rid of your guns. Stop your murdering. Prove that you are fit for office before you grab office and force the fact upon us."

I hope that in this Parliament my colleagues will put these matters before the House time and again. I may not see the next Parliament. I might be in a better place, looking down from a higher place, or I might even creep in. I trust that this Parliament will mark the establishment of democracy throughout Northern Ireland in which everyone, whether he be a Jew or a gentile, whether he be a Roman Catholic or a Protestant, whether he be an Orangeman or an Hibernian, will be able to say, "This is our Parliament and our country and we are ruling it within the United Kingdom." That is what I wish for my people.

I wish every one of the people of Northern Ireland the very best. They have done a great thing for me. I came to the House as a lone voice 35 years ago. I did not surrender my principles. I stood by them. I had good elections, I had bad elections, but now we have had the best election ever. There are eight more men and one woman to come after me. We have done excellently, but the work is before us. We must deliver the goods, and I hope the House will help the Ulster people to get the goods that they want. We want the same privileges, the same sort of government and the same democracy as other citizens have, and we are entitled to that as members of this great United Kingdom that we love.

5.14 pm

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, East) (Lab): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your reappointment as Chairman of Ways and Means. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on winning an historic third successive general election. I should like, too, to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Ms Barlow) on an excellent maiden speech, and I hope that she will be with us for many years to come representing the people of the Hove constituency.

I consider myself privileged to have been elected as the first Member of Parliament for the new Glasgow, East constituency, following the substantial boundary changes that took place in Scotland at this election when we saw our representation reduced from 72 seats to 59. I should like to place on record my appreciation of the people of Glasgow for their support for me over a number of years, because I was first elected to the House in 1979 for the Shettleston constituency, which is no longer a parliamentary constituency. I should also like to thank all the party members and others who worked so tirelessly on behalf of the Labour party and myself in the election campaign.

During the last eight years, the east end of Glasgow has undergone a renaissance. There have been tremendous improvements in that part of the city, yet one of the most annoying and distressing aspects of all is the fact that the media, or some parts of it, still portray the area in negative terms, which is depressing for local people and unfair to the area. It would be much better if the media were to concentrate on the positive aspects of the east end to encourage its regeneration and to assist Glasgow as a whole.

No one would deny that there are problems, but the good things overwhelmingly outnumber the bad. A youth organisation that I visited in the greater Easterhouse area, staffed entirely by volunteers, has 500 young people passing through its doors every week. It is sad that so many people engaged in voluntary organisations, who are the salt of the earth, should get kicked in the teeth by negative comments in the media about the area. I am sure that that applies in other cities in the UK.

As one would expect from a traditional working-class area, the main issues raised with me during the election campaign were bread-and-butter ones: law and order and the national health service, both devolved to the Scottish Parliament; jobs; pensions; tax credits, which are very popular, especially with people on lower incomes; the taxation of low incomes and pensions; the future of the new deal if Labour were to lose the election; and moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and cloning, which came up at all the hustings meetings and the various other meetings held throughout the campaign. However, the No. 1 concern of people in the east of Glasgow was the economy. People remember only too well what life was like for 18 years under the Tory Government, when the Queen's Speech was something to be afraid of and dreaded.

By contrast, there is much in today's Gracious Speech that will meet with universal approval. I welcome the proposal to introduce an offence of corporate manslaughter, and I hope that the legislation will not be delayed, as this is a long-overdue measure. Companies and their directors should be held responsible for their actions.

I welcome legislation to reduce casualties on the roads, but I hope that that will not be merely a breeding programme for more speed cameras. The proliferation of such cameras is one of the reasons why public-police relations are deteriorating, which is to be regretted. People lose their licences and their jobs, and they feel aggrieved. I am sorry to have to say that many people feel that the police would be far better engaged chasing burglars and other criminals than harassing motorists.

I welcome new consumer credit law to provide greater protection for consumers and to create a fairer credit market. There should be a limit on the rate of interest that banks, companies, stores and anyone lending money can charge. Some people need protecting from themselves. It is far too easy for them to get into debt by obtaining credit that they have no hope of ever repaying. We need to take steps to prevent that.

I welcome measures to give the police and local communities new powers to tackle violence related to knives, guns and alcohol. I regret, however, that no specific mention is made in the Queen's Speech of air guns. Sadly, just before the election campaign started, a terrible tragedy occurred in my constituency when a two-year-old toddler was killed by an air gun pellet. While I appreciate that legislation will not prevent some people from committing crimes, urgent action needs to be taken to tackle the problems caused by the misuse of air guns. I understand that the Home Secretary will consult the Scottish Executive on introducing proposals on this issue later this summer. I hope that that will happen sooner, rather than later.

On crime, I feel sorry for the police. I give them my full support and they do splendid work, but much of what they do is to some extent negated by the courts, which let down the law-abiding citizens of this country and its police force. If the courts were to make an example of some criminals, particularly those who commit acts of violence, crime would rapidly decrease. I cite an example from 40 or 50 years ago, which some Members may remember. Lord Carmont sentenced a few razor-slashers in Glasgow to 20 years' imprisonment, at a time when 20 years' imprisonment meant precisely that. Overnight, razor-slashing ceased. One way to deal with law and order issues in society is for the courts to take tougher action on criminals.

I welcome long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement. In addition, no tax should be levied on small occupational pensions, nor on small pensions for widows. In addition, we should consider reducing the age at which pensioners qualify for a free TV licence from 75 to 70. A TV licence is a substantial part of a pensioner's income, just as it is for people who are unemployed or on low incomes. Whether the TV licence is good value is a separate matter, but many of my constituents struggle to find the money to pay for it.

I also welcome measures to offer greater support for working families, such as extending maternity benefit and improving child care provision, along with reform of the welfare state in order to reduce poverty and offer greater equality. However, I am concerned about measures to reform the benefit system. Benefit fraud

[Mr. David Marshall]

must of course be tackled, but so must tax avoidance and evasion by mega-rich companies and individuals, which must cost the country a lot more than benefit fraud does. Most people on benefits are not there by choice. They do not get rich, and although there might be the odd such case that the media can highlight, it is only "the odd case". The vast majority of people on benefits merely survive. They cannot afford the same lifestyle as that enjoyed by those in employment.

Many people are genuinely unfit for work, or do not have the necessary skills to find jobs in their area or the resources to move elsewhere. They cannot just get on their bikes and go somewhere else. In some areas, jobs are not available in sufficient numbers, so this issue has to be handled carefully, especially in Scotland, if the approach taken is to command universal support. For example, in my city of Glasgow 100,000 people—one in three of the available work force—is classified as economically inactive, whatever that means. Most of the constituencies in Glasgow—there are now only seven—have higher-than-average levels of unemployment and numbers of pensioners. They have people who are caught in the poverty trap, problems with child poverty, lower-than-average adult male life expectancy—it is substantially lower than in prosperous areas elsewhere in Scotland or in the south of England; indeed, it is lower by as much as 14 to 17 years—and people surviving on benefits.

There is a crime and a drug problem in Glasgow as, sadly, there is in many of our towns and cities today. But part of Glasgow's problem is its former industrial heritage, which has affected the health of many people such as miners, steel workers and others who worked in heavy industry. Their lungs were badly damaged by dust, and they have had to live on benefits since retiring or being made redundant, which many were; indeed, they never worked again when Mrs. Thatcher was in power.

Glasgow is Scotland's only metropolitan area and it attracts people to work and play—leisure, as well as work. It does not always attract people to live there, as many do not want to pay the city's council tax, choosing to live on the perimeter estates and commute. When people in Glasgow get a good job, one of the first things that they do is to move outside to somewhere that they perceive, for one reason or another, to be different. Conversely, if people have problems with alcohol or drugs, or their marriages break up, they tend to drift into the city, so we have a continual turn-around, which creates problems in many constituencies and many parts of the city.

I have said several times in the House that Glasgow alone cannot solve the city's problems, which must be dealt with and resolved. Glasgow used to contain about a quarter of the Scottish population, but the figure is now much lower. I should have liked to hear something in the Queen's Speech about dealing with the problems of cities such as Glasgow. It is not unique, as other cities in the UK have similar problems. What we need is perhaps some special taskforce with a senior Minister in charge—someone who can accelerate the necessary action to combat the problems and work with all the other organisations in the area, such as devolved Administrations, local government departments, and the private, public and voluntary sectors.

There is a need to speed things up, but it is not just a matter of consultation. The GEAR—Glasgow eastern area renewal—project, which started in 1976 and was wound up by the Conservatives in 1987 when it was only half way through its task, was a classic. Much time was spent in consultation and the writing of reports, but what is needed to tackle the problems of sub-standard housing, crime and litter and to create prosperity for the city is action. I would favour some sort of pilot project that, if successful in a city like Glasgow, could be adopted to tackle problems in other cities.

I welcome the Scottish Executive's recent decision to overrule the public inquiry and to complete the M74, which I hope will bring thousands of jobs to the city, lead to an improved environment, develop derelict land and divert much of the traffic that currently goes through residential areas on to the new road.

I continue to have concerns about identity cards and will await the specific proposals with interest. Another of my concerns is the reform of public services. I believe that public services are best carried out by public sector workers themselves. They frequently fail to get appropriate recognition for the job that they do. They do not deserve to be privatised or have their pension scheme altered after years of service. New entrants may have to be treated differently from existing staff, but that is another matter.

Sir Stuart Bell: I am reluctant to intervene in my hon. Friend's excellent speech on the issues facing Glasgow. He mentioned his doubts about identity cards and I would like to assure him that, when I lived in France for 20 years, I carried my identity card with me at all times and had no difficulties. I believe that it will reduce fraud by at least a half and is one of the finest measures that we could possibly introduce. Is my hon. Friend open to persuasion at some time in the future?

Mr. Marshall: I am always open to persuasion, but I remain concerned about the compulsory nature of the scheme and the cost. People living on benefits are genuinely poor and are unlikely to be able to afford the costs of the ID card. There are other important issues involved, too, so I will wait to see exactly what is proposed before taking any decision.

I am also concerned about the future of the Royal Mail and the Post Office, and I shall certainly not vote for any proposals to privatise them. I am pleased that postal workers will be paid a bonus for their excellent efforts over the last year and I would like to congratulate all the postal workers who delivered all five candidates' electoral addresses in my constituency so well in the recent campaign. There are often complaints about deliveries of election literature, but I did not receive a single complaint this time. An excellent job was done.

Michael Connarty: I have a close association with the Communication Workers Union. My hon. Friend may have noted that Royal Mail management is still trying to press the Government to hold a share flotation, even though there is a commitment, under the Warwick deal, to keeping the service fully publicly owned. I hope that

he will join me in expressing concern to the Government that such a share flotation is not the way forward, given the mandate that we received at the election.

Mr. Marshall: As ever, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I assure him that I shall be happy to express my concerns on that matter. I believe in the universality of the postal service and postal rates. Moreover, I deplore the obscene bonuses and payments being paid to senior executives in the Royal Mail. They are only doing what they are already paid very well to do. I do not see why they should get a bonus for doing a good job, although I do understand why they should get the sack if they do not do a good job.

I am pleased that the Government will use their presidency of the G8 to make progress in tackling poverty in Africa, and climate change. I agree that Africa has to be a priority, but I hope that other needy areas of the world will not be forgotten. I am chairman of the executive committee of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Last year, I had the pleasure of leading a delegation to the Pacific. We visited Kiribati and the Solomon Islands, two of the poorest countries in the world. However, although those countries may be poor, they are very rich in their populations. The people are wonderful, and the children are beautiful: words fail me when it comes to describing the welcome received by people from the UK.

Most Pacific islanders are very pro-British, but many are also very poor. Some people live on much less than £1 a day. Global warming is a big threat to Kiribati and other small islands in the area, where the highest point is often only a few feet above sea level. Poverty is a huge problem. The delegation saw at first hand how even very small aid projects can make a substantial difference to the people who live on those small islands. I therefore make the plea that we must not forget or reduce our aid to the poorest countries in the Pacific and the Caribbean, or in other areas of the Commonwealth or the world.

I hope that the G8 countries, and the Doha round of World Trade Organisation negotiations, will make substantial progress in reducing debt for the most heavily indebted nations, by making trade fair, controlling arms trading, extending education to the world's children and making poverty history.

In conclusion, I am proud to be a Member of this House in a period when we have had three terms of Labour Government. My Government have their priorities right and are doing a great deal to tackle poverty and help poor people, both at home and abroad.

5.32 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I have been rather intrigued by many of the responses to the results of the election, not least by those who have claimed that the Conservative party was out of touch and received no response from the electorate. They have made out that we got it all wrong, but that is a little odd, given that the Conservative party got more votes in England than Labour did. In the overall total of votes, we ended up only two or three points adrift of the Labour party.

That does not suggest to me that we were that much out of touch with the voters, so I want to resist suggestions that we should go back to the drawing board, rethink our direction and alter it completely. I want to offer a template that might be of use to all parties in assessing the relevance of the Queen's Speech and determining the way forward. I shall suggest a number of key elements, to which I hope most hon. Members will sign up. Those factors can be used as a measure of policy proposals, in the Queen's Speech and elsewhere.

The element at the top of my list is nationhood, which is directly relevant to the remarks made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Sir Stuart Bell). Too often, we forget that ours is a very proud nation, and that most people in this country want this country to remain just that—a nation. They are proud of our identity and wish to retain it, and our ability to control our affairs and destiny. At the head of my list of material criteria, I put nationhood. Any development, in the European Union or elsewhere, should be measured against that, and if it threatens our nationhood, it should be resisted.

My second criterion is freedom, although I qualify that by saying that it should be freedom for responsible individuals, guaranteed by the rule of law, administered by an independent judiciary and with minimal state activity. Freedom is surely something that we all treasure and want to protect at all costs, but it must be a freedom regulated as I have suggested and defended by the proper institutions of the Government and the judiciary.

One need not dwell on democracy, except to say that it is surely sad that many people expressed doubt in the recent election about the integrity and validity of our electoral system. We have come to a stage where, as all Members and all candidates at the election must have heard from many voters, there is unhappiness about the fact that the electoral system can no longer be trusted in the way that we were all brought up to assume that it could. Democracy in this country must be defended in many ways, not least in that our voting system must be above suspicion and beyond fraud.

Security applies, of course, not only to the defence of the realm against attack from outside but to the security of our citizenry against inside threats of terrorism.

A sense of community, defined, I suggest, by geography, tradition, inheritance and a sense of identity, is something that we all greatly value.

In that context, I do not subscribe to the trendy concept of what I think is known as multiculturalism, which I think threatens our sense of community. I believe in the melting pot theory of history rather than in multiculturalism. Those people whom we welcome into this country from other countries and cultures should be expected to blend into our communities and to accept our traditions and the things that we value, rather than expecting us to see them altering our society when they choose to come here.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): Is the right hon. Gentleman really saying that it is not possible to respect cultures from other countries and other religions while still preserving our own rich culture? Is he saying that that is impossible?

Mr. Forth: I am saying that that can cause unacceptable problems and difficulties. Where people

[Mr. Forth]

who come freely to this country insist on maintaining their cultures, which are so different from ours, to the extent that it divides society, that is something that should be resisted. That is exactly what I am saying. Multiculturalism as a concept should be challenged rather than simply accepted without further explanation.

My next criterion is capitalism, which is by far the most historically effective method of wealth creation, and which, of course, is gender neutral, ethnicity neutral and class neutral. The beauty of capitalism and money is that they have no favourites and discriminate against no one.

Allied closely to that point, and, interestingly, reflected in a number of places in the Queen's Speech, is the criterion of choice. In fairness to the Government and the Prime Minister, I say that this is one regard in which they have moved very much in the direction for which we have always argued, which is to favour as much choice as possible in society, particularly within services provided by the state, be they health or education. As the Leader of the Opposition said earlier, where we see elements of the Queen's Speech that will be beneficial, we will be prepared to welcome and encourage them. Choice is one of those things. Choice is related closely to enterprise, the great generator of wealth and employment. It should be encouraged by low taxes and by my final criterion, deregulation.

I have not just dreamed up those criteria. I have not listed those things arbitrarily. They are in fact the principles of a wonderful organisation known as Conservative Way Forward, of which the chairman is my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). Those principles were drawn up in 1998 and endorsed by none other than Baroness Thatcher herself. I am proud to list them and to recommend them to the House. If we are prepared to sign up to nationhood, freedom, democracy, security, community, capitalism, choice, enterprise and deregulation, we will not go far wrong. I say that not just as a measure of the Queen's Speech, but to reassure my right hon. and hon. Friends that we need not agonise, examine ourselves or go into contortions over what the party believes in. I should have thought that we could all sign up to that set of principles. We can cleave to those principles and go before the electorate with confidence, and we can also use them to develop our policies.

If we look at the Queen's Speech in relation to those principles, it is obvious that it contains far too many Bills and too little substance. For the Government to come to this Parliament, Commons and Lords, and say that they want this number of Bills to be processed in one legislative Session, even a long one, illustrates all too well and yet again their attitude to the parliamentary process. Their attitude is one of arrogance and indifference, and it suggests that they do not believe that any adequate scrutiny will be necessary because we will simply process the Bills uncritically and see them on to the statute book. Well, I hope that that will not happen. I can see no way in which a Queen's Speech containing so much material can be translated into legislation even in the time that we have available between now and November 2006.

I do not believe that the matters outlined in the Queen's Speech can receive proper scrutiny in that time, never mind the fact that many of the phrases in it are completely vacuous. For example, it states that the Government will

"reform the education system to improve quality".

Well, that is the sort of soundbite that one expects occasionally from politicians, but I do not expect to see it in a serious Queen's Speech, especially at a time when pass marks in our education system are being systematically lowered. I read just recently that it has now been recommended that spelling should no longer matter in English examinations. How can the Government talk about improving quality in education in the Queen's Speech but at the same time systematically reduce quality in education by fiddling the system to give everybody better and better results? That cannot be right and I hope that it will be resisted.

Another vague promise made is that the Government

"will begin long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement."

What does that mean? What are we supposed to make of such a promise? It suggests that the Queen's Speech is a wish list, not a seriously thought-out set of proposals to achieve the ends included in the list.

The Queen's Speech also promises a Bill

"to give police and local communities new powers to tackle knives, guns and alcohol-related violence."

The problem is not that the police need new powers: it is enabling them to do the job that we expect them to do. Time and again, it has become obvious that an increase in police numbers or in the number of community officers—the Prime Minister mentioned them—simply is not enough, if we so constrain them with bureaucracy, red tape, and human rights and political correctness that they cannot do their job properly and we cannot have the confidence in them that we all desperately want to have. Once again, the Queen's Speech provides the wrong solution to a self-evident problem.

The promise in the Queen's Speech that bothers me more than any other, however, is:

"My Government will bring forward proposals to continue the reform of the House of Lords."

I have dark doubts that that means proper reform of the House of Lords, of the kind that we were led to believe might happen in the balmy days of 1996 and 1997, when we thought that the upper House would be given legitimacy and accountability. I suspect that the Government wish to reduce the effectiveness of the House of Lords, which it has demonstrated so well recently. They want to nobble the House of Lords and submit it to the same total control that they sadly now exercise over this House.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is on to a good point. Does he agree that one way of improving scrutiny would be to give the House of Lords more power and that the only way to do that legitimately is to introduce an elected element?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I very much agree with him and I am happy to say that that is our party's policy, as he knows. We are the champions of democracy in this case, while the

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Government apparently want to resist any move towards democratisation of our parliamentary process, especially in the upper House. We shall not get that in the foreseeable future, because the Prime Minister does not want it. He wants to continue to appoint his cronies to the House of Lords, thus single-handedly giving the Government greater and greater influence and voting power in the House of Lords in what is becoming a scandalous way. Sadly, some of the more recent elevations to the peerage demonstrate that yet again.

One of the great strengths of their lordships' House is not only that the Government do not have a majority there, but that they cannot control the timetable of proceedings, so a more worrying development in the short term is that, hidden behind the rather bland and meaningless words of the Queen's Speech is the thought that the Government want to get a grip on the House of Lords as they have successively done over the past few years on this House.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): My right hon. Friend may not yet have had access to the 190-page briefing supplied to the press, although not to the House, as background to the Queen's Speech. It states:

"The Government is committed to legislating . . . to place limits on the time bills spend in the second chamber."

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right. I do not have access to that document, which raises a point that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or Mr. Speaker may want to look into: how is it that Members of Parliament receive from the Government only a flimsy document containing meaningless phrases of the kind that I have just identified whereas, as my hon. Friend points out, members of the press were apparently at the same time issued with a briefing of—how many pages?

Mr. Fallon: Two hundred.

Mr. Forth: A 200-page document giving much more detail about what the Government intend to do. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it must worry you and Mr. Speaker that Members of the House are yet again being treated with contempt by the Government. Typically, the press knows much more about the Government's intentions than we do, which is something that should be looked into and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing it out. If the phrase that he quoted is correct, my suspicions are fully justified: the Government will go ahead and try, finally, to reduce the House of Lords to the same obsequious position in which we find ourselves in this place. They will thus be able to process all the Bills in the Queen's Speech in a way that guarantees that they receive almost no scrutiny.

I urge my colleagues to consider whether the principles that I have outlined commend themselves and to use them as guidelines for the development of our policies, which need not be very different from those on which we won more votes in England than the Labour party in the recent election. I urge my colleagues to resist any move, such as those I have outlined, to reduce the role of this Parliament vis-à-vis this Government.

5.48 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). He is known as one of Parliament's plain speakers. He is also known for his choice of tie—today it looks very multicultural and I congratulate him on his choice.

I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your re-election as Chairman of Ways and Means and I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Ms Barlow) on her maiden speech. I am convinced that she will be just as good at promoting the interests of her constituents as her predecessor, Ivor Caplin, who I remember with great fondness. As Minister with responsibility for veterans, he came to my constituency, strolled down Belgrave road and visited a senior citizens club where he received a great reception.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst spoke of a victory for the Conservative party in England and Wales.

Mr. Evans: Only in England.

Keith Vaz: Well, the Conservatives did not win in Leicester. I am happy to say that the electors of Leicester, East returned me with an increased majority of 2,500 and a swing to Labour of 2.69 per cent. We also managed to win back Leicester, South, a constituency that was held by the Liberal Democrats for about 10 months, so Leicester has returned three Labour MPs. Of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Patricia Hewitt) is now Secretary of State for Health, so we look forward to massive investment in our health service in Leicester and in other parts of the country.

We got our result because we followed mainstream Labour party policies. We put before the electors of Leicester, East the Government's record over the past eight years, and we gave them the choice between what we were putting forward and that of the Conservative party candidate, who was a mainstream candidate pursuing the policies of the Conservative party.

Mr. Forth: Will the hon. Gentleman be able to impress us as much if he tells us the turnout in Leicester? He is giving great praise to the good people of Leicester for re-electing him and his colleagues, but perhaps he could tell us how many of them bothered to turn out to do so.

Keith Vaz: The figure was 63 per cent.—up on the previous general election—and the postal vote turnout was about 74 per cent., although it is impossible to say how many of those who received postal votes actually voted. Turnout affects us all in our constituencies and we would like as many people to vote as possible. I favour compulsory voting at elections because turnout would be very high indeed.

We put forward our mainstream policies, we put forward the record of this Government, and the people returned a Labour Government. I know that it is possible to play with statistics. One might say that the Conservatives won in this or that region or in England, and that the Labour party won in Scotland and so on, but overall we have a Labour Government—a properly and duly elected Labour Government—and those who accept the results of 1979 have to accept the results of 2005.

[Keith Vaz]

I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for leading us to an historic third election victory. I want him to serve a full term as Prime Minister, as he promised to do during the election campaign. It is very important that he fulfils that pledge because his work has not been completed—and judging by the number of Bills in the Queen's Speech the Government's legislative programme is very full indeed.

I want to make three quick points about three aspects of policy. The first concerns a subject that was mentioned by both the leader of the Liberal Democrats and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Sir Stuart Bell), namely, the Government's European policy. I welcome the number of Bills on Europe that are currently before the House. I welcome the fact that the Government are still committed to the enlargement of the European Union. They did not stop with the enlargement on 1 May 2004, which has brought huge benefits to our country. Some of my hon. Friends will remember the concerns expressed by Opposition Front Benchers about the number of eastern Europeans coming to the United Kingdom. They were all supposed to be applying for benefits and unemployment was going to go up. Of course, that has not happened. The arrival of the new members has benefited Britain enormously and contributed greatly to our economy.

It is right that we should introduce legislation that will allow Romania and Bulgaria to enter the European Union. It is right that the Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, are the champions of enlargement, and are therefore pushing the case for Turkey. I would like us to look again at the block that we put on the entry of Croatia, for the reasons that have been outlined. It is important that we do not put a cap on membership of the European Union. We should ensure that it is as wide as possible, providing our country and Europe with great opportunities.

If we are to meet the targets of the Lisbon agenda we need to make absolutely certain that we can compete with the United States, and to do that we need the widest possible reform. That is why I hope that when we take over the presidency of the EU on 1 July we will push forward that reform agenda—an agenda that was set out clearly in the joint letter from the Prime Minister and Chancellor Schröder in 2002. They detailed a long list of reforms that they thought were essential for the progress of the European Union. We have not ticked all those boxes, but we have a golden opportunity from 1 July onwards to ensure that that agenda really is part of what we hope to achieve. We simply cannot accept a common agricultural policy that is so out of date that it does not actually benefit the agricultural agendas of this country and other European countries—apart, of course, from the French.

I look forward to hearing the new Minister for Europe when he addresses the House tomorrow. I understand that he will be opening the foreign affairs debate because the Foreign Secretary will be absent. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has decided that the Minister for Europe should attend Cabinet meetings. I have always felt that it is essential for the Government to give Europe a much higher priority. It is impossible for the British Foreign Secretary to give detailed attention to the European Union agenda. We have had seven Ministers for Europe over the past eight years, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, South (Mr. Alexander) will last longer than some of the others. The fact remains that we need to have that expertise at that level to take us through the presidency and beyond.

I well remember my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) being extremely beastly to me when I was Minister for Europe, chiding me for not visiting the Balkans, despite the fact that as Minister for Europe I, like my predecessors and successors, had almost a third of the world as part of my portfolio. Indeed, when I was first appointed I was asked by the then Foreign Secretary whether I would take on entry clearance in addition to my European portfolio, and I was told by the permanent secretary that to do so would mean that I had to give up Russia.

It is impossible for a Minister to do his job effectively unless he is given the time and space to do it. I know that the Minister for Europe can only attend Cabinet meetings, but I see no reason why he should not permanently attend Cabinet—perhaps in a kind of Chief Secretary to the Treasury role—thereby enabling two Ministers to represent the Foreign Office. It will stop Select Committees and colleagues being horrible to Ministers by saying that they have not visited this or that country. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock is very keen for the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to visit Poland—that was one of his great campaigns. I do not know whether Ministers have managed to do so, but this will enable that work load to be shared.

On the European constitution referendum, I take a different view from that advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough. If France votes no in its referendum at the end of the month, I do not see why we should have a referendum. If a major country like France rejects the European constitution in a referendum, what is the point of our having a referendum?

Mr. Forth: One point would be this—there are already hints, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, that if the French give the wrong answer in their referendum, they will be asked again, and maybe again, until they give the right answer, and one way of preventing that from happening would be for us, in our referendum, to give the right answer and be done with it.

Keith Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman knows the answer and he is trying to tease me on this. The problem is that if any of the 25 EU members reject the constitution, the partners will have to come together and renegotiate. He knows how the European Union operates—it will not be done in five minutes. Even though I am very much in favour of the constitution and believe that it would be good for Europe and for this country, I believe that if France and other countries reject the constitution the great difficulty will be that the British people will get the wrong message, and people like the right hon. Gentleman will be saying, "Why vote yes? France has already said no and there is no point in voting yes because the constitution will not be adopted by the rest of the European Union."

We need to think about the issue and we should not pre-judge what will happen in France. I hope very much that the French will vote in favour, but if they do not we

should seriously consider postponing our referendum—which we think will take place in the next two years, although we do not know the timetable. I hope that that will help the country to gear up to a proper debate on Europe, and it is important that the lead should come from the Government.

We now have a new team at the Foreign Office, with a new Minister for Europe who will be able to do a superb job during the presidency months. He will come out of the six months of the presidency with a bounce, as will this country. While we are conducting the Union's presidency, we should ensure that we engage with the British people on the issue of Europe. If France votes yes and we decide to continue to hold a referendum, we would then be geared up for a proper campaign, which will enable us to put the arguments before the British people.

Europe, which features in the Queen's Speech and will be the subject of a number of major Bills, will be one of the themes of the next 12 months or so, and it is very important that that debate should start in the House of Commons and then go out to the rest of the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough has said.

The second issue that I want to consider is immigration and asylum. Unfortunately, I was chatting to my new hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), so I missed the point on multiculturalism made by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst—this is not an invitation to him to make that point again—but I know what the Conservative party did during the election campaign. It tried to play on the fears of the British people that, somehow, immigration was bad for this country and that the asylum system was somehow the result of something that the Government have done over the past eight years.

I am a first generation immigrant: someone born in Yemen who came to this country, and whose parents were economic migrants from India who went to Yemen to find work. They eventually came to the United Kingdom to find work and to give their children an education that they considered to be the best in the world, exercising their rights as British citizens, having lived in a British colony and coming to settle here in the United Kingdom. So I say as first generation immigrant that immigration to this country has hugely benefited our nation.

I am surprised at the right hon. Gentleman for raising this issue in the way that he did, because in the debates on race and immigration in the House over the past five years or so I thought we had seen a change in mood—a recognition by the Conservative party that this country has benefited enormously from immigration, that we welcome the fact that we have different cultures and different religions in the United Kingdom and that we want people to progress in this nation.

People of Asian and Afro-Caribbean origins now sit as Conservative MPs—such people have sat as Labour MPs for as long as I have been elected to the House. Indeed, the only sadness from the Liberal Democrats' point of view is that their one ethnic minority MP lost his seat in the recent general election. It is good for this country that the House of Commons should be representative of society as a whole. It is good for my city, Leicester—which is almost 50 per cent. Asian in ethnic origin—and it is good for Britain. Therefore, it must be good for the message that we send out.

We have a tough immigration and asylum policy. I have a 90 per cent. immigration caseload. Some 90 per cent. of those who come to my surgeries on Fridays have immigration problems. I have never had a "yes" back from a Labour immigration Minister when I have asked him to exercise his discretion in favour of one my constituents. That is a really tough policy.

Mass immigration to this country has ended. People cannot settle here unless they are spouses or the elderly dependants of a British citizen. People cannot arrive here, as they could eight years ago, as visitors and settle in this country. People cannot switch from being students to settling permanently. It is very difficult to get a work permit, as I know, having today tried to get through to Sheffield and being passed to five different people in an attempt to get a chef to come to work in one of the restaurants in my constituency. It is a very tough policy, so it is wrong of the Conservative party to tell the people of this country that, somehow, the Government are easy going on immigration and asylum.

The real problem rests with the immigration and nationality directorate, although it is processing cases as quickly as possible. When someone applies for asylum, it is totally unfair and unjust to let their case hang on in the IND for up to two years and then to tell them at the end of the process—after some of them have married and had children in that period—that it is time for them to leave the country. We need to focus on enforcement and tackling delay. The policy is right—it is firm, but fair—but we must also ensure that, in some way, we enable those decisions to be taken as quickly as possible, so that people can be told when they must go and make the necessary arrangements. We cannot deal with that unless we deal with the IND.

The problems with the IND started under the Conservative Government. I know about that because I tabled questions when I was first elected and discovered that bags of letters were unopened at the IND because the people there simply could not deal with the number of applications. The problem is systemic and it affects all hon. Members who represent inner-city constituencies. People come to see us and say that the Home Office promised to let them have a reply in 13 days, but they have not had a reply two years later. It is not the policy that is wrong, it is the administration. Let us sort out the administration.

Finally, on immigration and asylum, I will oppose the Government's proposals to restrict the right of appeal on visitors' cases. That was announced by the Home Secretary when he produced the White Paper before the election. It is fundamentally wrong to take away the right of appeal for British citizens who wish to be visited by relatives—a right of appeal that the Government gave in 1997. We are putting far too much power in the hands of the entry clearance officers, and we should ensure that that is not allowed to happen.

On health, as I said earlier, I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West is the new Secretary of State for Health. I share a road with my right hon. Friend—the Belgrave road—and I have known her for many years. She will make a real difference to the health portfolio. She will build on her

[Keith Vaz]

predecessors' reforms to ensure that we have a very good health system. However, the issue is not just one of giving more money to the national health service; it is about ensuring that money reaches front-line services. I and all other hon. Members can give examples of constituents who, despite the huge amount of money that we have put into the NHS, have been subjected to delays while waiting for their operations. We need to deal with front-line services. We need to ensure that when people want to see a doctor, they can do so as quickly as possible. They should be dealt with by their GP and should not need to go to casualty.

We must also ensure that we look at the way in which our hospitals operate. Leicester has, in effect, been promised three new hospitals. These decisions were taken before my right hon. Friend was appointed Secretary of State for Health. The Leicester general hospital at Evington is being rebuilt. It is near the home of the mother of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik). We welcome that new hospital, but let us also look at sections of the health service that affect our constituents, such as charging people to park their cars when they visit their sick relatives in hospital. One of my constituents had to take his daughter to casualty at the Leicester royal infirmary. He parked his car right outside casualty. When he came out, he found that his car had been clamped, even though he had saved the ambulance the trip, and he had to pay a fine. That was unnecessary. Those are the issues that really affect our constituents.

Let us invest all that money—I thank the Secretary of State for Health for giving us all that money—but let us ensure that we have more front-line services and, frankly, fewer managers. We have delivered a lot in the past eight years and the people have endorsed our record. However, we still have a lot to do. I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Government on what they have done and I look forward to five more years during which we will continue to deliver great public services to the people of our country.

6.10 pm

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): I am very aware that, in making a maiden speech, the tradition in the House is to avoid all matters of controversy but, after the remarks of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) about the recent election result, I think that it is perhaps one tradition that I will need to tweak a little. In the face of a result that gives an overall majority to the Labour party with a share of the vote that is the lowest for any governing party since 1832, defenders of the electoral system must say to what share of the vote they are prepared to see Government support sink before they finally admit that it is not a legitimate mandate from the British people. Defenders of the system must answer that question now that the evidence is clear that we have a three-party system.

Let me try to get back on track and return to matters of less controversy by paying tribute to my predecessor, David Chidgey, as the Member of Parliament for Eastleigh. I am only the fourth Member of Parliament for Eastleigh since the creation of the constituency in 1955, and I hope that I am not indulging in wishful thinking in pointing out that the longest-serving Member for my constituency, Sir David Price, was elected in 1955 with a majority even more slender than my own—23 votes fewer than my munificent majority of 568. The MPs for Eastleigh who were elected with large majorities unfortunately had the shortest tenure. I give notice to anyone suggesting that they might retake the seat that that will only be after a fight from me.

My immediate predecessor, David Chidgey, whose contribution to the House and service to his constituents is soon to be recognised in ennoblement and transfer to another place, also retained his by-election win at the 1997 election with a slender majority and then won substantially more comfortably in 2001. Indeed, the fall in the majority at the last election is testimony to the affection in which he was held by his constituents. I will do my best to live up to that reputation and to maintain standards as an excellent constituency MP.

Eastleigh constituency is a varied part of Hampshire. It contains the town of the same name and many settlements to the east of Southampton. The town was created when the railway works of the London and South Western Railway were moved from Nine Elms in London in 1891, and that is why the recent announcement of the closure of the Alstom railway works—the last remaining connection with the great days of Eastleigh railway engineering—is such a shock to our community. For the third of the constituency that is Eastleigh town, Eastleigh still means the railway and all the skills and dedication that are necessary to make the railways work. We now face the challenge of finding new jobs to take the place not just of those at Alstom but at Manor Bakeries, which is most famous for the production of Mr. Kipling's exceedingly fine cakes. I see that a number of Members have clearly enjoyed them in their time.

On the plus side, Eastleigh has continued to grow as a logistic centre, thanks in part to its ideal position near the junction of the M3 and M27, and with Southampton airport, which is really Eastleigh airport. It is now the biggest single site employer in the borough. The engineering tradition is maintained in the south of the constituency at Hamble by Aerostructures, a subsidiary of Smiths Industries that makes key components for the aviation industry, including leading wing edges for both Boeing and Airbus aircraft. That is playing both sides for a clear win. The history of the aviation industry has long been intertwined with our area, and a notable event was the maiden flight from Eastleigh airport of the prototype for the Spitfire. Other important engineering names include CooperVision for contact lenses and, of course, the VT Group of defence shipbuilders and repairers, whose headquarters are in the middle of the constituency at Hedge End.

Hedge End has become a thriving population centre, with its origins as a distinct village like so many other centres in the constituency. Bishopstoke traces its origins to before the Domesday Book, while Fair Oak, West End and Botley are long-standing settlements to the east of Southampton. Botley was home to William Cobbett of the "Rural Rides" and was therefore an early exponent of rural radicalism. Further south along the Hamble river is Bursledon, which once launched one of Nelson's key flagships, and Hamble-le-Rice itself, which is now the headquarters of the Royal Yachting Association and the proud home of no fewer than three

sailing clubs. Finally, Netley Abbey boasts a castle that has long stood guard against intruders along the Solent while the abbey itself is a ruined but picturesque reminder of the unorthodox means employed by one of our former monarchs to balance the public Exchequer.

All these areas have distinct and important identities as successful communities, with so much to offer in terms of quality of life. That is why one important political issue for me will remain how to balance the need for affordable homes for young local people with the enormous development pressures in what the right hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill), the previous Minister for Housing and Planning, has called the "Solent gateway". Maintaining those communities and their identities is an important priority that suggests that development should be limited to brownfield sites and existing urban areas.

Another important political issue is the current state of the health service across Hampshire, whose trusts are now running a cumulative deficit of more than £50 million. Although there has been substantial increases in funding for which the Government deserve due credit, the increases have not kept up with the equally substantial increases in costs due, for example, to the junior doctors new contract. As a result, both the finances and other stress indicators, such as accident and emergency waiting times, ward closures and the need to fill nursing vacancies temporarily through agency nurses, all suggest that there is a lot of pain to come in the local health service. I, for one, will seek proper justification for the Government's plans to spend a fifth less per head on health in the Eastleigh and Test Valley South primary care trust than the national average and 40 per cent. less than the funding per head in the north-east.

We may, indeed, in the south of the country be relatively affluent, but we also face higher costs. The business of government is not merely to provide redistribution to the least well-off, important though that is, but to provide public goods for all those—rich and poor—who need them. We should no more run down the health service in the south than cut street lighting in prosperous areas on the ground that their needs are less than those in deprived ones.

Finally, let me say something about arriving in the House with a background of six years in the European Parliament. There is an enormous sense of relief that whatever one says is likely to be subject to the normal distortions of one's opponents rather than the random contortions of the interpreters. However, I am also surprised at the nervousness in the House about the encroachments on its power by the institutions of the European Union. It is obvious to me, as Member of the European Parliament for six years, that that Parliament deals with important but largely technical legislation that matters hugely certainly to business, the single market and our prosperity, but that the concerns of voters on the doorstep about health, education, crime, pensions, tax and the economy remain squarely and rightly in the national domain. Far from being a federal superstate, the European Union institutions employ fewer people in total than Hampshire county council, they have been repealing more legislation than they have put on the statute book for the past 10 years and they account for just one fortieth of total public spending by all levels of government. That is one of the reasons why it is such a signal honour for me to be returned by the people of Eastleigh to represent them in the House. This is still the cockpit of our democracy, and long may it remain so.

6.19 pm

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your return as Chairman of Ways and Means, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Ms Barlow) on her excellent maiden speech. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) made a fine maiden speech and I am sure that he will make a valuable contribution to our debates. He certainly has a hard act to follow in his predecessor, who was well respected here, which is evidenced by his imminent accession to the other place. I was going to congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of State, Department for Constitutional Affairs, on her new appointment, but unfortunately she has just left the Chamber. I intend to refer directly to her responsibilities.

I welcome the Queen's Speech, especially the references to creating safe and secure communities and fostering a culture of respect. Such policies will be greatly welcomed throughout the country, not least in my constituency. At the forefront of such policies will be our elected local authorities. They are not mentioned directly in the Queen's Speech, so I hope that that points to a period of stability and a lack of interference by central Government, although I somehow doubt it. However, I have a great deal of respect for my right hon. Friend the Minister of Communities and Local Government and I know that he will have the strength of character to overcome the prejudices of the civil service when dealing with local government.

Thinking about democratic mandates brings me neatly to House of Lords reform. Unlike the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I do not believe that the effectiveness of the House of Lords is measured by how well it frustrates the mandate of the elected Government—whatever political colour they might be. If he believes that people in the country at large want another 500 elected politicians, with their salaries and expenses, he has not been watching events very closely.

I was pleased by the reference in the Queen's Speech to continuing the reform of the House of Lords. Although I must admit that that was not a prime topic of conversation raised with me on the doorstep, it remains a fundamental plank of the constitutional bridge by which we have brought the governance of the United Kingdom into the 21st century. Great steps have already been made in the direction of reform, and although the hereditary principle has been consigned to the political dustbin for all but the remaining few, the breezes of reform are yet to blow away the last vestiges of power held by a wealthy, privileged class. However, I am sure that many hon. Members share my amusement at the irony that the only democratic element in the upper House is the remaining hereditary peers, who recently had to hold a democratic ballot to select a replacement for a deceased peer.

There must be further reform to make the second chamber more representative and accountable. The status quo is not sustainable, and when the remaining

[Mr. David Clelland]

hereditaries are gone—I hope that that will happen soon—it will be totally unacceptable for the entire House to be appointed by the Prime Minister, whoever that might be. On the other hand, an elected, or partly elected, second chamber would seriously threaten the primacy of the House of Commons and destabilise our system of government.

Before we enter into a debate on how representatives in the other place should be selected, it is important to decide what the functions of the second chamber should be. It has long been my view that the second chamber's role should be deliberative, revising and advisory. The job of holding the Executive to account is for the Opposition and Back Benchers in this place, not for the House of Lords. It should be a function of the second chamber that it can suggest, but not make, amendments to legislation. Such amendments could be deposited in the Vote Office of the House of Commons, but would have to be tabled by a Member of the House of Commons and debated and voted on here. There would be no more ping-pong or deliberate attempts to frustrate the will of the democratically elected House of Commons. Amendments would thus be more likely to be well considered and genuinely helpful, instead of being the politically motivated decisions that emanated from the Lords during the last Parliament.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am interested by what my hon. Friend is saying, but does he agree that we should consider not only the powers and responsibilities of the upper House, which are important, but the way in which this House operates? Does he agree that an important aspect of reforming the system of scrutiny would be to enshrine in the processes of the House pre-legislative scrutiny, which worked effectively in the last Parliament?

Mr. Clelland: I agree with my hon. Friend. The system of draft Bills that was tried in the last Parliament worked extremely well, so I hope that the Government will increasingly adopt it in the future.

The second chamber should give well considered advice, publicly debate the great issues of the day and make comment on the quality of legislation and governance, with its views commanding wide respect. It should be made up of people selected for their experience and knowledge and considered qualified to offer advice and guidance to the elected House. However, such a second chamber could not be guaranteed by elections.

There is more to our democracy than elected politicians. Many bodies—statutory, voluntary and professional—play an important, and indeed vital, role in our democratic society. I envisage the second chamber drawing its membership from those bodies. They would provide the gender and ethnic balance that still eludes the Commons, but is needed if a truly revising, advisory and representative body is to have any claim to legitimacy.

It would be possible to create a second chamber made up of such eminent people while making it representative and more accountable. However, that would not be achieved by creating yet another appointments commission because that would be only a small step towards more democracy. Experience shows that appointments commissions merely appoint people such as their members. Also, who appoints the appointments commission?

We must make the selection of representatives in the Lords more democratic by widening the responsibility for making appointments. Political parties should appoint representatives regionally, perhaps in proportion to the number of votes cast in the general election. Local government and devolved Assemblies should appoint representatives, as should business, trade unions, voluntary bodies, religious organisations and so on. We would thus create a representative second chamber with members who would be accountable to their appointing organisations. It would be separate and distinct from, but complementary to, the elected House of Commons. Such a new second chamber would add value to our system of governance and, in the words of our manifesto, be more

"effective, legitimate and more representative without challenging the primacy of the House of Commons."

Perhaps more important than widening access to power is widening access to prosperity and opportunity. I am proud to be a member of a political party with that as its central tenet of belief. The Labour Government have done much more than any previous Government to attack poverty and the causes of poverty, and that work must be intensified during this Parliament, both at home and overseas. I welcome the references in the Queen's Speech to such matters.

I was also pleased to hear the references to support for housing costs. Many of my constituents struggle to get on the first rung of the housing ladder, even though they live in the north of England, where prices are much lower than in the south. Some housing associations providing shared ownership schemes have offered welcome help and support to first-time buyers, but there is a snag to that. Shared ownership can mean that a housing association effectively owns part of a property while the buyer has a mortgage for the rest. The original intention was that the buyer would buy out the association and become the sole owner. However, the rise in property prices has meant that rather than a buyer having to repay the £15,000 contributed by the association, for example, he or she must pay many times that sum because the value of the house is now nearer £75,000 than the original £30,000. Such a sum is completely beyond the means of many home owners, so they are thus prevented from getting off the first rung of the housing ladder. I make a plea for a structure that recognises housing associations' contributions by allowing them to charge a reasonable amount of interest on the sum borrowed, but does not let them share fully in the increased value of the property, thus avoiding trapping people with a debt that they can never repay.

There is a reference in the Queen's Speech to help for consumers. Many years ago, I introduced a private Member's Bill that hit the statute book as the Sale and Supply of Goods Act 1994. I was proud of the legislation, which for the first time, amazingly, meant that goods sold had to be fit for the purpose for which they were sold. That principle now seems to have been enshrined in most of our commercial transactions. However, one thing remains glaringly exempt: the private sale of motor cars. The daughter of a friend of

mine recently bought a car for £3,000. After taking it in for a service, she was told that it was a death trap. When she took it back to the seller, she was told, "Tough." Aficionados of "Only Fools and Horses" will be familiar with Boycie, the man from whom one should not buy a used car. Sadly, Boycie is by no means a fictitious character. I am afraid that he is alive and well in many areas. Although it may be a joke on a TV programme, it is not a joke for the many hard-working citizens who buy a used car only to find—sometimes only days later—that the car on which they have spent their hard-earned cash, or for which they have taken out a loan at an exorbitant interest rate, is not roadworthy.

It is probably impossible to legislate for rogues and charlatans to have scruples or, dare I say it, respect, but it is certainly possible to legislate to ensure that it would be illegal to sell a car with less than, say, nine months of a valid MOT certificate to run. That would give the buyer some measure of confidence in the roadworthiness of the vehicle and some redress with the testing station should it turn out not to be so. It would also afford much protection for hard-working families. I hope that the Government find time in the other measures that Her Majesty said would be laid before us to introduce such simple but essential protection to buyers, to say nothing of making our roads safer.

Although not referred to directly in the Queen's Speech, transport is none the less vital to the pursuance of many of the Government's objectives. It is an aspect of Government policy that needs to be elevated up the priority list, nationally and in the north-east. Driving down to the House yesterday, I noticed much ongoing work to improve the road network, and there were several instances of major improvements to the A1. None, however, were in the north-east. Ours is a much neglected region in terms of investment in the transport infrastructure and remains the only region in Britain not directly linked to the national motorway network.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): Get real.

Mr. Clelland: Does the hon. Gentleman want to intervene?

Robert Key: Yes. If the hon. Gentleman were to experience the congestion, the gridlock and the lack of investment in roads in the south of England, he might think twice before coming to the House and begging for money for roads in the north-east.

Mr. Clelland: If I am ignorant of road congestion in the south, the hon. Gentleman is equally ignorant of problems in the north-east. I represent the north-east and am entitled to argue on behalf of my region.

Let me educate the hon. Gentleman. The links from the north to Scotland rely on miles on single carriageway roads. Our links to the north-west are on intermittent stretches of dual and single carriageway. Our links to the south are by two-lane motorway and then dual carriageway through North Yorkshire. The traffic congestion on the A1 western bypass through Gateshead and Newcastle rivals the worst cases elsewhere and, I suggest, anything experienced in the south-west. It will get much worse without early intervention.

The north-east badly needs a detailed regional integrated transport plan to link our conurbations and to serve our local communities. Regional transport plans, drawn up in the regions, by the people from the regions, should form an integral part of national transport planning. Bus operators have more interest in their licence to print money than in their licence to run buses. There is no effective control of bus services and no meaningful integration with other modes of transport, such as the Tyne and Wear Metro system. We need legislation to bring some regulation of local bus services back to local authorities so that they have an influence over the services provided to local people.

Mr. Kevan Jones: On what my hon. Friend says about integrated transport in the north-east, many of the problems in my constituency relate to bus travel. They were made worse following deregulation by the Conservative Government. Does he agree that one thing the north-east needs is a single passenger transport authority, or some other body, to control transport for the entire region? It is quite a small region, but it is still divided, with different types of transport in operation.

Mr. Clelland: I agree entirely. That is my point. We need a regional transport strategy and a regional transport authority to plan and implement it. The Tyne and Wear Metro system is badly in need of modernisation, upgrading and, some would say, extending. I look forward to the co-operation of Transport Ministers in the sensible and detailed proposals of the transport executive, Nexus, to maintain that popular system at the quality and level of service to which people have become used.

We need more adventurous thinking in the Department for Transport, and I hope that the Eddington review helps to provide that. Our manifesto said that we will consider options for a new generation of high-speed intercity trains. My recent question to the Secretary of State about the use of the linear motor—the Maglev system—to provide fast, efficient and environmentally friendly intercity trains met with the comment that only one small stretch had been tried in China, and it was still in the experimental stage. Why, when the linear motor was developed here more than 50 years ago, are we waiting for some other country to develop it before we are brave enough to put a toe in the water? We should be leading the way in innovative and climate-friendly transport systems, not following others.

The proposed provision of free local transport for the elderly is very welcome, but it is restricted to buses and local authority boundaries. Unless that can be extended and applied to systems like the Tyne and Wear Metro, which accounts for 20 per cent. of all public transport journeys in the area, the system will suffer a drop in revenue, the flexibility of travel modes will be restricted, and those who live in areas served mainly by metro will have to pay, while those where buses predominate will travel for free.

Transport is one of the major challenges facing the new Government, and I hope that we see new and radical proposals to drag it into the 21st century. That would cost money, of course, but a fraction of the money going into London transport and the proposed Crossrail system would provide much needed relief and a boost to the economy of the north-east.

[Mr. Clelland]

The north-south divide continues to dominate the harbingers of doom and despair in the northern press. Although things have certainly improved in the north-east—unemployment has tumbled, measures such as the minimum wage have hugely improved the lives of thousands of citizens, educational achievement has improved and new health services have been introduced—the disparity between the north and the south is not reducing as the current philosophy that all regions should advance equally maintains its breadth and its depth.

However, for most citizens the quality of life in the region remains high. Ours is a region of beauty and culture, with a proud history of contributing to the prosperity of this country. The efforts of people in the region to improve the lives and lifestyles of the population are showing real dividends. The Chancellor's target of full employment is welcome and achievable, but only if the region's economy is growing and sustainable. In that regard, Government assistance in bringing more research and development into the region, which has the lowest level of research and development, and the redistribution of the promised civil service functions out of London and the south, would be of much assistance. More respect for, and policies to assist, the manufacturing industry would be greatly welcomed in the north-east.

I also welcome proposals to bring about greater voter participation. Postal voting has proved popular. Although we need safeguards against abuse, the experience in Newcastle and Gateshead is that it has worked well, and more and more electors are requesting it. That was certainly the experience in the last general election.

In this historic third-term Labour Government, we have a great opportunity to bring about a fundamental and positive shift in the social and economic life of our citizens and the way in which our country is governed. I know that the basic principles of the Labour party will take us in that direction and that this Government will implement the policies to get us there. The Queen's Speech is the first step along the way.

6.38 pm

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): My first words in this new Parliament must be to thank the electors of Salisbury constituency for returning me and for lending me their trust in my sixth Parliament representing that wonderful constituency. It was an interesting election campaign for a number of reasons. The turnout, I am glad to say, was good. It was better than last time, at 68 per cent., but back in 1992 it was 80 per cent. So we still saw too few people voting, and we need to ask ourselves why.

I suspect that one of the reasons is the dysfunction between the style of election campaigning at national level and what actually goes on in our constituencies. I am sure we all experienced that in the past few weeks. We live in a traditional part of England, and my electors would not let me get away without attending a lot of public meetings. In fact, I spoke at 22 public meetings in the election campaign. Those who say that it cannot be worth it because no one turns out might be interested to know that in total more than 700 people came to those election meetings. Obviously, some were small gatherings and some were larger. What was interesting was that the people who attended those meetings, which were held in the evening—after I had put in six hours on the battle bus each day going around the 106 villages outside Salisbury—had all watched the early evening news and wanted to talk about something completely different. Yes, they wanted to talk about our party's main points relating to police, school discipline, clean hospitals, controlled immigration, low tax and accountability—that was fine—but they also wanted to discuss a great deal else that simply did not feature in the national campaign. They wanted to talk about climate change and the environment, waste and recycling, housing, science—my constituency has a large science base—education, the rural economy and farming. They even wanted to talk about religion and politics. They talked about Europe and the constitution and about Englishness, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will be glad to hear. They wanted to talk about our cultural heritage, Stonehenge, transport issues, and Salisbury courthouses and why the Government appear to be reneging on promises in that respect.

What is the reason for that dysfunction? I suspect it is that the media pundits have a Westminster village agenda—they sit in the Westminster village for a month and do not venture out into the real world. I wonder whether those who conduct the forensic textual analysis that continues day after day, night after night—those excellent and highly professional gentlemen John Humphrys, David Dimbleby, Jeremy Paxman and Jim Naughtie—are really in touch with the electors. Incidentally, they are all men—with one or two honourable exceptions, there was not a female voice to be heard among the commentators on the election. If they are not in touch, that might account for the low turnout.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, like pit ponies, members of the Westminster lobby should be allowed to roam around the country during the summers?

Robert Key: My impression is that they already do so quite a lot, but that is a sensible suggestion which the lobby should be encouraged to consider.

One person whose passing I lament—the next election will be the duller for it—is the distinguished journalist Andrew Marr, who has lent an important dimension to reporting of politics in this country. He has come at us from all sides and he is no respecter of people or pomposity—or, indeed, of party. He has given us a good run for our money and I wish him well for the future. He will be missed, but we look forward to seeing the next—no doubt even more distinguished—chapter of his life unfold.

What I wish to discuss this evening is covered by the immortal words of the Queen's Speech:

"Other measures will be laid before you."

I mind most something that is not specifically mentioned in the Queen's Speech, but throughout the Speech and the suggestions for legislation runs the theme of science, and it is science that I wish to discuss. The wreckage of

science policy over the past decade or so is strewn across the political landscape of this country. Whether we are dealing with genetically modified crops, the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, nanotechnology, foot and mouth disease, the Energy Bill or global warming, the problem is that we in this country now have an anti-science culture. We have to tackle that problem, and as a member of the Science and Technology Committee in the last Parliament, I have no doubt that the right place to start is in education—in primary education, right at the bottom of the ladder.

It is extraordinary that, up to about the age of 10, young people are obsessed with dinosaurs and space. Their inquiring little minds look backwards, where they are enchanted by dinosaurs, and forwards into space, where they love sci-fi and all the games that are available. But after about the age of 10, they switch off. Science is too hard and too dull, the curriculum turns them right off and, in any case, all the other subjects are much easier. That is a real national problem. We have to grasp the nettle of science if we are to maintain our position as the fourth largest economy in the world and our nation's prosperity in the face of competition from China, India and the Pacific economies.

Mr. Purchase: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman's sentiments, but does he agree with me that part of the problem—perhaps the major part—is the fact that when young people reach the age of 18, 19 or 20, they realise that the labour market is far better at rewarding accountants and lawyers than it has ever been at rewarding scientists and technologists?

Robert Key: I am delighted to agree with the hon. Gentleman. In fact, the problem is worse than that: all the best science graduates are snapped up by the City institutions because they are good at working systems and understanding mathematical models and computing. He is absolutely right, but we have to start with science education.

The problem facing any Government—the last Government had to face it and the current Government have to face it in spades—is that they are frightened of science, the public are frightened of science, and, with some honourable exceptions, journalists know little about science. The result is a lot of gesture politics in science. The Government think that if they set up citizens' juries, focus groups, stakeholder forums and consensus conferences, and if they pass the buck between the scientists and the decision makers in government, when something goes wrong they can say, "Well, we're all to blame aren't we? It's not only my fault." That is a real problem which much be tackled.

The solution starts with trust—trust in scientists and in their status. If we are to rectify that problem, we need more scientists, educated to a higher standard, and we have to give them their head in their field. The solution also requires trust in politicians. We should not usurp scientists. Although there is a certain amount of science that is either right or wrong, there is more in which value judgments about risk are required. Nothing is risk free, but we do not understand risk well enough and we do not try to explain it. If we continue to fail in that respect, we shall not engender trust. In addition, there is the problem of deflecting blame or not holding the right person to account if something goes wrong. It seems that there is always someone to blame. Take the example of foot and mouth disease. Whom do we blame for that? We still do not know. We do not know who was wrong—whether it was the scientists, the farmers, the vets, or the Government who should have been talking about vaccination. We try to deflect blame when things go wrong, but that is because we do not understand the nature of risk and the fact that nothing is risk free. One of the ways to tackle that problem is to create new demand for greater openness and transparency. There is uncertainty in all things, but continuous obfuscation by Government about serious matters affecting us all—whether it is GM crops, nanotechnology or anything else—does us no service at all. Worse still, if we are too secretive about the wrong things, we stifle innovation and discourage scientists from producing what they are capable of producing.

There is one point that I shall address head on: our energy sources and how we produce base-load electricity in future. It is extraordinary that the British debate on nuclear energy has been tainted for so long by the defence legacy of the past 60 or 70 years—the fact that early nuclear energy was produced in conjunction with defence trials and the defence uses of nuclear fission. That legacy continues to distort our perception today, and we have to get beyond it. We are tackling the problem of nuclear waste through legislation introduced by the Government in the last Parliament—I give them credit for that. If we can overcome that problem and the defence legacy, we can move forward.

We must not be deflected from our path by self-appointed pressure groups who are opposed to nuclear energy for a variety of reasons, but who have managed to skew public opinion in this country by exploiting fear, prejudice and sheer ignorance about nuclear process. We need a wholly new approach. First, we have to state clearly that safety is paramount in all our energy sources. That is so obvious and so far beyond dispute that it should not be a matter of argument between those who are opposed to nuclear energy and those who are not. I was interested in what the Finnish people did when they decided to move ahead with a new generation of nuclear plants, so I went to Finland—I declare an interest—to discover the facts. I wanted both to hear about technological developments and to understand the political processes that had led the Finnish people to conclude that they needed a new generation of nuclear plants.

One of the first things that I discovered, apart from the putting of safety first, was that they had persuaded themselves as a nation that they had a moral duty, first, to clean up the mess of previous nuclear generations and, secondly, to address climate change in a grown-up way, and to accept that in a no-carbon economy generated by nuclear energy, that is a moral position to adopt. It is preferable to high imports, even of natural gas, let alone other fossil fuels.

It was then a question of serious public education. It took the Finns eight years to reach the stage where they felt that they could take votes in Parliament. There was also the national interest, of persuading people that rather than being fearful of nuclear energy they should be interested in security of supply for the nation and the problem of base-load capacity, which can never be met by renewable energy such as windmills. In addition, there was the problem of storage of nuclear waste. There were local issues to be considered.

[Robert Key]

We are sitting in London but there are communities in the north-west—for example, around Sellafield, in Cumbria—where the entire population, one way or another, depends on the nuclear industry. We must understand that those who are living in such areas do not share the fears and do not countenance the prejudices that perhaps people have in the Westminster village. The national interest must be complemented by local interests in the highly skilled, highly paid, highly responsible and highly fulfilling jobs that are available in high technology industries such as the nuclear industry.

The issue of future waste is extremely important. It is an approach to science that we forget. We must work out before we start becoming involved in new science and technology what to do with waste products. Nuclear waste is a classic example. I have seen the future in Finland; I have seen how the Finns are handling the issue. I have been down the first of the new deep-level facilities that they are constructing. They are constructed on the basis that if someone has a bright idea in 300 years' time, it will be possible to retrieve the nuclear waste and treat it. Meanwhile, it will be safe.

Then there is financing. What a revolution! Imagine going to the City and saying, "We want to build a nuclear power station. Will the City sign up to a 60-year business plan?" That is the problem that we face. Of course, the City will not do that, but that has been done in Finland, where those involved have said that the Government will not be involved and there will be no taxpayers' money. There must be a consortium of people who are prepared to wait 60 years. All the big users of energy in Finland—60 private companies—got together to form a new company, which is putting up 25 per cent. of the capital straight away, over 60 years.

That financing system is extremely important. The short-term nature of financial investment in this country is a problem if one goes to the City, where 60 years will not be countenanced. If it were not for tax breaks, a windmill would not be built anywhere in the UK at present. Tax breaks, rather than anything else, are driving wind turbines at the moment.

There is a huge role for the Energy Intensive Users Group, which was formed many years ago. The group consists of the big users such as the steel and chemical industries, paper, glass, ceramics and gypsum. Alcan and Rio Tinto are two large companies that are involved. They are also allied to the Major Energy Users Council, which has been working since 1987 to bring things together. If only we could persuade the big users to become involved, we would be able to make proper use of the technology that is available.

The Government have a double lock on progress in nuclear energy. At present, the Government are in denial because they are split. It is all very well saying that industry must come to us, the Government, with proposals. I agree that a UK Government will probably never build another nuclear power station. That must come from the private sector, which will be prepared to take the risk if the two locks are undone by Government. The first lock is that it is necessary to have a licence to build a nuclear power plant and the second is the need for a second licence to operate it. Until the Government are prepared to concede that when everything else is in place—safety, waste disposal and finance, for example—they will be prepared to unlock the double lock, the industry will not be prepared to make the first move. It will not be prepared to take the risk.

These are the issues that we should be discussing in this Parliament. What I have described in terms of nuclear energy is replicated throughout science and technology in this country, whether it is nanotechnology, stem cell research or new technologies in a wide range of industrial processes on which the UK depends. It is up to us to start thinking differently, in a completely fresh way, about the nature of risk, the nature of investment and the nature of partnership between the Government and the private sector. That is what I hope to see coming out of the Queen's Speech and in legislation that we shall see in future. I hope that we shall also see a marine Bill, which we have been promised. Above all, we must take science seriously. It will take several Parliaments to change the tide in favour of science. I hope that the Government will be brave enough to grasp that point at primary school level right through to universities and beyond.

6.55 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Ms Barlow) on her maiden speech. Secondly, I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne). The hon. Gentleman's predecessor was David Chidgey. I enjoyed his company immensely. He was a good companion of mine on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. The predecessor of my hon. Friend the Member for Hove, Ivor Caplin, was a fine Minister. We owe him a great deal. He made a real job of the portfolio of a Minister for veterans. He did much to advance the awareness of and the interest in veterans and their dependants in Government. Although others held the portfolio, Ivor Caplin was the first Minister who really identified with the post, which is one that will now endure in Government. The post was long overdue. It is to the credit of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that he created the portfolio. Ivor Caplin distinguished himself in the stewardship of the office in a wonderful way. We should be grateful to him, as I have said.

I have listened to the debate. One of the good things about being called to speak late in the day is that it is possible to respond to and comment—

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): It is the middle of the debate.

Andrew Mackinlay: There are many Members who have spoken in the debate who are now not in their places. I listened carefully to what they said and I shall make one or two comments. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) made a number of points and I shall refer to two of them. He referred to some concern, which is acknowledged and which we share, about the apparent lack of interest in politics. He set out some of the causes and solutions.

We have not heard since the election about the matter of Howard Flight. His dismissal from the Opposition Front Bench was a matter for the Conservative party, but I was worried that a party leader can end a person's career—

Mr. Fallon: We are debating the Queen's Speech.

Andrew Mackinlay: The hon. Gentleman asks from a sedentary position whether it is a matter to be raised in a debate on the Queen's Speech. I am responding to the right hon. Member for Wokingham. I am not making a partisan point. I have acknowledged that the issue is one for the Conservative party when it comes to whom it puts in to bat as chairmen or shadow Ministers. If we are seen as monolithic parties and if party leaders can stop people standing for Parliament, cynicism about this place will be reinforced. I see right hon. and hon. Members acknowledging that it is a valid point. We are seen in this place as being party men and women and never being able to express a critical point of view. It is time we addressed this position and recognised that a bad precedent was set.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham referred to tax. I rejoice that in the third paragraph of the Queen's Speech there is a reference to the fact that we will improve our essential public services. I do not know whether it is true or not, but the right hon. Gentleman alleged that £4 of every £10 of people's earnings is spent on tax. I rejoice, however, in the fact that we have people in employment who can pay tax. There is an increasing tax yield, so we can improve the quality of public services. That needs to be stated at a time when there is continuing criticism of our public expenditure policies and our priorities. One of the distinguishing features of the Queen's Speech is our belief that we can improve the quality and provision of essential public services because we have full employment, which was not the case when the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues were in government.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and others said that the Queen's Speech was extremely vague, and I have some sympathy with that view. If we introduce reform, it should not do away with the rubric and the ritual, which I can live with. Doing away with such things is not modernisation. Modernisation is about increasing the accountability, stewardship and transparency of government. Today's Queen's Speech, as gracious as it is, is nevertheless pretty empty. The House of Commons should have been presented with the detailed legislative programme that, apparently, was distributed to members of the Press Gallery. In my view, there should be a White Paper. The new ministry should be presented to the House of Commons, and it should be endorsed by a vote in the Commons. There are historical precedents for such a parliamentary procedure, which is deployed in other Westminster-style legislatures and should take place here some weeks after a general election.

As an aside, it is cruel that hon. Members, wherever they come from, are expected to decant their offices within hours when they lose their seat. New Members are homeless and lack an office. It would be much more sensible if the mandate of their predecessors continued to the end of the poll or beyond, as happens in many other legislatures. Of course, there would need to be ground rules about things that Members cannot do during an election period, such as use the equipment and facilities of the House, but they should remain Members of Parliament until the new ministry is endorsed by the House of Commons. That would be a sensible reform.

The Queen's Speech should be a detailed programme, and the Prime Minister should present his new ministry to the House of Commons two or three weeks after the general election. That would allow an orderly transfer of ministries. However, it is not just Governments who change at general elections. It is in the interests of their constituents that Members of Parliament should be able to depart with dignity and new Members should gradually assume their parliamentary duties. I hope that that suggestion will be taken on board.

I hope that when he concludes our debate today, my hon. Friend the Minister will help me with something. I have looked in vain in the Queen's Speech for mention of an extremely attractive issue that appeared in our party manifesto—the promise that we would legislate to protect bank holidays, which would be additional to the minimum holiday entitlement. That electoral commitment would have a great effect on my constituency, which has a large retail sector in and around Lakeside. It is also important to people in the building and construction industry. I hope that the Minister will assure us that it will be legislated for in this Session. If that is the case, I would like to know why it did not appear in the Queen's Speech.

Mr. Robathan: Is the hon. Gentleman really surprised that what was in the Labour manifesto is not being legislated for? Recent Labour manifestos have included such things as an undertaking not to introduce top-up fees. I think that he might have rebelled on that one.

Andrew Mackinlay: I am drawing a line on that which is past. I shall start again. I hope that the Government will take advice and counselling from Back Benchers like me, stand by their manifesto commitments and reassure me that they will be fulfilled in this Session.

I listened intently to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Robert Key), and much of what he said about science and our decisions about energy provision deserve serious consideration. However, when he said that people in Sellafield do not share other people's anxieties about the nuclear industry, two things occurred to me. First, throughout history, unfortunately it has been the case that people who have to work in a particular industry often have to convince themselves that it is safe. Those who worked at Chernobyl have been mentioned. I accept that there is a qualitative difference between standards in the old Soviet Union and standards in the British nuclear industry but, nevertheless, it is inevitable that people believe that their industry is safe, even though that is not always the case. Secondly, the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) was in the Chamber when the hon. Member for Salisbury was speaking. People living in Northern Ireland and around Dublin bay in the Irish Republic have grounds for grave concern about what has been produced at Sellafield, so the situation is not as simple as has been suggested.

I hope, however, that in view of his speech, the hon. Member for Salisbury will endorse measures in the Queen's Speech to legislate for corporate manslaughter,

[Andrew Mackinlay]

as they are long overdue. If corporate manslaughter is on the statute book, the sanction of serious penalties including imprisonment will help to focus the minds of managers and directors on the fact that they can no longer treat things in a cavalier fashion. When tragedies occur, they cannot blame the lowest people in the railway hierarchy, the maritime industry or the nuclear industry. They themselves must recognise that they will face criminal sanctions and severe penalties. I hope that the hon. Gentleman welcomes that.

Robert Key: Does the hon. Gentleman remember the case of the MV Derbyshire, which sank in the China seas? We still do not know what happened and whether it was a design fault or an act of nature, so it may fall into the same category.

Andrew Mackinlay: It would. At the back of my mind is the Herald of Free Enterprise. The people who ran that ship were trying to maximise profits and turnaround time with blatant disregard for the safety of passengers and crew. The individuals who were pilloried and received most of the penalties and the blame were not the directors but people who were low on the scale of responsibilities. Earlier, it was suggested that we should not oppose for opposition's sake. I certainly do not do so, but there are some things that we ought to embrace. I hope that all the parties embrace that proposal.

On the question of identity cards, when the Identity Cards Bill received its Second Reading in the last Session, David Trimble, the previous leader of the Ulster Unionist party and I challenged the Minister in charge to explain how he would deal with the common travel area between the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. I remember the occasion, because it rankles with me that we were brushed aside as if that problem were irrelevant. It has still not been addressed. I am not opposed to identity cards, but I believe that legislation should have great clarity, precision and effectiveness. We have not been told, however, how the Government will deal with people who commute from the Irish Republic to the United Kingdom. We have a common land border, and many people also commute from the Irish Republic to London on Mondays and go home at weekends. Once identity card legislation is in force, everyone will have either an identity card or a passport in London—except for people from the Irish Republic. I am not criticising the Government, but I am alerting them to the fact that the arrangements have not been thought through. There is a common travel area, but, quite rightly, we cannot legislate for the Irish Republic—that would be a monumental cheek. Bearing in mind that I raised the matter some months ago, I invite the Minister to tell me tonight how the Government intend to remedy it.

According to the Gracious Speech, we are to have a fair and flexible system in relation to immigration and asylum. I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), who is no longer present. I thought he did a wonderful job of clarifying the position and challenging the Conservatives to say how and to what extent they would have reduced immigration. There is controlled immigration to this country already. I was frustrated by the fact that members of the Government Front-Bench team did not challenge the Conservatives more on this during the election.

There has been a conflation—that is the buzz word, I think—of asylum and immigration, which are two separate issues. I challenge those on the Conservative Front Bench to explain to us this evening through which categories of people immigration would be reduced. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East pointed out, immigration is strictly controlled. I deprecate the fact that the Conservatives use the term without spelling out the consequences and where there is scope for reduced immigration—even assuming that that is necessarily a desirable objective, which I do not accept.

On asylum, which is a quite separate matter, the problem has been in the administration of the applications, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East pointed out. We have a proud record under successive Governments of allowing people who suffer persecution to come to the United Kingdom. Like hon. Members in all parts of the House, I have seen in my surgeries people who have endured the most terrible atrocities against themselves, their families and their loved ones. Sometimes, commentators and some of our constituents do not fully understand what such people have suffered.

Reference was made to public meetings. I remember one public meeting that I had with representatives of the Churches in my constituency during the election. Although by and large the mood of the meeting was with me, I thought it important to remind those attending the meeting that 2,000 years ago there was a little boy who fled persecution in Palestine with his mummy and daddy. The new testament does not tell us whether the people of Egypt said, "All these Jewish carpenters are economic migrants, coming to take our jobs". It is interesting that Christ was a refugee from persecution. Sometimes I wonder whether we have moved on enormously in our understanding and compassion. It is fair to remind everyone of our obligations and duties and to give examples from 2,000 years ago to illustrate our commitments to our brethren.

The Conservatives made a big issue of hygiene in our hospitals. Over a long period some of us Members on the Labour Benches have also made an issue of MRSA, as it is commonly known. The hon. Member for Salisbury generously said that on many such issues it is difficult to apportion blame. It is now acknowledged that there is a real problem. My own view, which I want to share with the House, is that part of the problem was not with Conservative or Labour Ministers, but with Ministers who do not stand up to officials.

On 19 March 1997, I held an Adjournment debate in the House, to which the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) replied. He is a decent man, but he worked off a brief and basically said that the hon. Member for Thurrock was exaggerating and that there was no problem—the matter was under control. I challenged him, saying that figures were not being kept for infection rates in our hospitals, but the hon. Gentleman said that that was wrong. Baroness Cumberlege, who was a Conservative health Minister, said the same thing in the other place. Instead of challenging officials, Ministers often accept what they say and dismiss what Back Benchers, who have their ear to the ground, are

asserting in the House of Commons. I hope Ministers will start listening to Back Benchers earlier, regardless of party, if they have a point.

I cannot help feeling that if people like me—I say this with some humility, uncharacteristically—and Lord Fitt, who raised the matter in the House of Lords in 1997, had been listened to, we may well have been on top of the problem of MRSA earlier. We would have understood that hospitals had a vested interest in covering up their deficiencies. The absence of corporate liability and the existence of star points for hospitals and a competitive environment led to a conspiracy of silence from the lowest level in the health service right up to the top, and reluctance to admit that there is a problem and that it should be tackled.

Both Conservative Ministers and the early Labour Administration fell into that chasm, listening to officials rather than to Members of Parliament. However, credit is due to the former Secretary of State for Health, now the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid) and others, who recently started to address the problem. I wish that had been done earlier, not just by my Government, but by Conservative Ministers, too.

We heard in the Gracious Speech that there is to be legislation to protect the natural environment. For me, that flagged up the green belt. During the election my opponent suggested that the Deputy Prime Minister personally was going to build 16,500 houses in one of the most beautiful areas in my constituency. There was not a scintilla of truth in that, but I want it stated and underlined that the green belt is sacrosanct. There is a good reason why that should be so. In my constituency and in the constituencies of many other hon. Members, there is a rich reservoir of derelict land—brown land—redundant industrial land, the development of which would be in the interests of environmental improvement. There is no need to encroach upon the green belt in my area and elsewhere.

Perhaps that needs to be restated. Let me be generous—perhaps there has been a misunderstanding. The green belt concept, which was created by a Labour Government, should be sacrosanct and we should be proud of it, as we are of the national health service. I hope that will be borne in mind. No doubt my hon. Friend the Minister will tell the Deputy Prime Minister this very evening what I have said and urged.

I referred to new Members who made their maiden speech. I made my maiden speech on the first day of the Session in 1992 and I was pleased to get it over. I revisited it to see what I had said then and what had come to pass. One thing I said was that the existing electoral system was indefensible. Secondly, I argued that we should be doing all we could to bring the countries of central Europe—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—into the European Union, and we have done that. In fairness, John Major started that process, but when history comes to be written, the present Prime Minister will be entitled to claim considerable credit and take considerable pride in the enlargement of the European Union. In today's Queen's Speech, it is anticipated that we will bring in Romania and Bulgaria, which I welcome. For me, the enlargement of the EU is an economic, commercial and political matter, but there is also a moral aspect. Those of us who have been able to enjoy parliamentary democracy since 1945 cannot deny those other countries the opportunities that come from membership of that democratic club. We should all embrace and encourage that where we can.

The third issue was Select Committees. I said that I had heard it rumoured—this was in 1992—that the Government might go slow in setting up Select Committees. I want a reassurance that there is no prospect whatever that that will happen this summer. It is extremely important that the Government are scrutinised by the Select Committee system, which has moved on considerably since 1992. It is important that one should refer to one's maiden speech from time to time.

The hon. Member for Antrim, North spoke about his party's endorsement in the Northern Ireland elections. I do not want to trespass into that, but the Government should ensure that there is proper scrutiny of legislation that relates to Northern Ireland, rather than dealing with it in an hour and a half in a Committee upstairs, with no opportunity of amending it. In addition, the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is costing a large sum of money, must be brought into force. Even if the Executive cannot be up and running, the Assembly needs to scrutinise measures endorsed by this House. That would be the appropriate democratic procedure and in the best interests of government.

My final point—*[Interruption.]* It has not been raised so far, so even if it is a boring point, it is a new point. The Queen's Speech says:

> "My Government will continue to play its full part in international affairs."

With respect, no reference has been made in the House to the events in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the situation is grave. Elsewhere in the Queen's speech there is the theme of promoting democracy and human rights. There should be an early statement on Uzbekistan, because our policy, our stewardship and our representation in Uzbekistan needs to be discussed. I see the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) acknowledging that. The Foreign Affairs Committee, when I was a member and previously, tried to argue with the Foreign Office that there should be an embassy in Kyrgyzstan. There is not one. It had a velvet revolution six weeks ago and there was no British representation there. Refugees are now crossing the border from Uzbekistan to the very small republic and fragile state of Kyrgyzstan, and so far as I am aware there is no British embassy there even today. That is a serious failure. I do not entirely blame Ministers; I blame Sir Michael Jay who runs the Foreign Office. He has been told time and again by the Foreign Affairs Committee that we should have an embassy and an ambassador in Kyrgyzstan, and he has refused. Our representation in Uzbekistan has been seriously flawed. There are some issues in Uzbekistan, unrelated to Craig Murray, concerning what has gone on in the embassy, which require serious examination. Two articles in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* have alluded to that. It is now time for a statement on the region. The Select Committees with appropriate jurisdiction should examine what has happened there and why there has been neglect in that area, and ensure that there is an early improvement in our representation in that region, which is critical in terms of its geopolitics, energy and human rights. I regret that that has not been done.

[Andrew Mackinlay]

Members groaned when I started to make this point, but I hope that they will agree that that was an original point, which it is valid to raise in the House. I thank the House for its patience, but I hope that those points will be picked up by the Minister when he replies.

7.22 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): I am conscious that a number of colleagues wish to speak, so I shall try to be short and I will abandon my notes. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), not least because I contested his constituency 25 years ago in 1979. As he took us for a tour around Grays and Tilbury, I reflected that that was the election when the Conservatives promised to let people buy their own council houses, and thinking back over those 25 years it is interesting how much those Conservative ideas of the first Thatcher Government have dominated the political landscape ever since. This Government, in the last three Parliaments, have had to act within the parameters that were set by what was achieved in the Thatcher years following 1979.

The hon. Gentleman raised another important point that I do not think the House had taken on board; I certainly had not. It is an example of the contemptuousness of the Government generally towards the House that while those in the Press Gallery are given a huge and detailed briefing on every Bill, there is no similar briefing in the Vote Office. The media has 200 pages of briefing, but there is nothing for Members of Parliament. That is illustrative of the way in which we constantly have to seek to extract information from Ministers and Departments by tabling questions. It is almost some sort of parlour game. It should not be. If this is to be a grown-up Parliament where we all contribute seriously to debate, I can see no reason why that information should not be made equally available to us.

Every Queen's Speech lists, almost frenetically, all the Bills that are to be debated. This one, with 40-plus Bills, must be something of a record, but it seeks to give the impression that the more Bills there are, the more problems the Government can tackle. The truth is that although the first paragraph refers to the economy, the Government are running out of money, and sooner or later in this Parliament we will either see taxes rise or services cut. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition pointed out today in an excellent speech, the Prime Minister seriously curtailed the ability to raise taxes by ruling out increases in national insurance and the basic rate of tax, so where will the money come from? In areas such as mine in Oxfordshire and the south-east, it will come through stealth taxes. For example, the amount of money that is made available to local government from central grant will be cut, council tax will then rise, and the Government will cynically seek to blame those political parties that control district and county councils for increasing council tax and reducing services—when in truth it is central Government and the Chancellor who are to blame, reducing grant and skewing the grant system so that their friends in the north get more while people in the south get less.

The Queen's Speech makes no reference to the horrendous situation that will arise in the next few months as a result of council tax rebanding and revaluation. Ministers say that that will in some way be fiscally neutral; that the take will not be increased. In Wales, for every house that went down a band, three houses went up. That will be a real issue in constituencies such as mine and for much of the south. It will be particularly hard for people on fixed incomes, such as those in the public services. Much is made in this Queen's Speech about reforming the public services, but it is not much good reforming law and order if there are no police officers. The Thames valley police force does not have the necessary police officers because the cost of living is not taken into account when they are recruited. Metropolitan police officers can earn £6,000 a year more than police officers in Banbury and Bicester, and Met police have free travel from Banbury and Bicester, so it is not surprising that Thames Valley police is constantly haemorrhaging police officers. Likewise, it is not surprising that the Oxford Radcliffe Hospital NHS Trust is often in financial difficulties if the only way that it can recruit nurses is from nurse agency banks where they receive premium rates of pay because it does not take into account the cost of living problems in the south-east.

None of those issues is addressed in the Queen's Speech. As this Parliament proceeds, many Members will have to explain to their constituents that they are becoming worse off financially because the Government are simply taking more and more in stealth taxes, while they receive fewer and fewer services—for which the Government seek to blame the local deliverers of those services.

The Queen's Speech also makes no reference to the increasing lack of democratic accountability. It talks about the reform of the House of Lords, but what about reform of unelected institutions such as the South East England regional assembly? The sort of issue that caused concern on the doorsteps during my election campaign was the housing numbers being imposed on places such as Banbury and Bicester without any democratic debate. That is a real undermining of district councils. I do not know why on earth people stand as district councillors when key matters such as how fast and how far communities should expand seem to be determined in Dorking or Guildford by unelected officials. No one quite knows or understands whole layers of planning systems that deliver new housing numbers.

One group that has been particularly hard hit is pensioners. One of the most amazing sentences in the Gracious Speech is:

> "My Government will begin long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement."

Where have the Government been for the past eight years if they are now only just beginning to address the issue? There should be a quick rendering of the alleluia chorus. It will be interesting to see whether there are more than a couple of lines on this issue in the Press Gallery briefing. Like so many others issues, it was kicked into the long grass during the general election campaign. It was one of many difficult issues that the Government should have faced up to into detail, but simply did not.

The frenetic activity of some 40 Bills cannot alter the fact that the economy on which all this is built is beginning to crumble. This Government are running out of money. Many of these Bills are interesting and worthy, and I certainly share in the delight expressed earlier at the introduction of a Bill on corporate manslaughter; indeed, Anne Jones and her family, constituents of mine, will be also be delighted. However, during this Parliament in areas such as mine—those in the south, the south-east, Oxfordshire and the Thames valley—the burden of taxation will go up and the quality and level of services will go down. I suspect that this issue will form a fundamental part of the debate in this place during the next five years.

7.30 pm

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): First, I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your well-earned reappointment. Many in this House have on many occasions had reason to be thankful for your guidance and kindness. I also congratulate those from all parts of the House who are making their maiden speeches. I hope that their stay will be long and constructive.

I must start by expressing some disappointment at the regressive view taken by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) concerning the nature of a multicultural society. I urge him to rethink and to remember the words of Roy Jenkins, which were very profound at the time and still resonate with us today. He said that we want a society in which we can have cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. That provides the ideal for a society in which everyone is valued, and everyone can make a contribution in an equal way.

Wolverhampton is a very good example of a city that is rapidly developing a cultural diversity that enriches the whole of that city. Indeed, people there find tolerance, friendship and a welcome, despite difficulties arising from time to time, which we must expect. None the less, we make it more difficult to appreciate cultural diversity if economic diversity is so great that many lives become a battle just to make ends meet.

The Gracious Speech suggests that the Government have put education at the heart. Many in this House will endorse that priority, but we may think that there are different ways of achieving the same objectives. It is obvious that I, coming from a west midlands seat, have a considerable interest—as many of us in that region do—in manufacturing, and especially in engineering products. We have had a considerable setback with the loss of Rover in recent months, and although the Government did what they could it was never going to be sufficient. Part of the Rover problem is that it is simply not big enough. We have spoken of Europe today, and perhaps at some stage there will be an opportunity to develop a truly European motor industry based on indigenous companies such as Rover, Citroen and Peugeot. That would be a way of ensuring an indigenous motor industry in Europe capable of competing with the rest of the world. Despite such setbacks, productivity in manufacturing generally, and particularly in engineering, has massively outstripped productivity in society as a whole. Manufacturing output, while certainly not surging ahead, is just about managing to hold its own.

Exports are an extremely important part of manufacturing industry. Regardless of the euro debate that we will doubtless have at some stage, or of the more immediate argument concerning the constitutional treaty, in manufacturing terms we are all Europeans now. The days when a company's biggest rival was just at the end of the street are gone for ever; now, our fiercest competitor is just as likely to be in Berlin or Beijing. We have to adopt an international mindset if we are to succeed in continuing to lift our people's living standards. Even smaller companies must consider adding a European dimension to their development strategies. Britain exports or dies. Currently, we are not recognising that problem—and it is a problem—as fully as is necessary.

I want to put in a plug for the national exhibition centre, which plays an extremely important part in providing a shop window for Britain's exporters. My plea to our Front Benchers and to the House as a whole is to recognise that more needs to be done for our exporters at every level. The NEC has an important role to play in that regard, and it ought to be seen in the role of a competitor with the big European venues, in order to give us a competitive edge for our exporters throughout the nation, but particularly in manufacturing.

The driving force for the improvement in the knowledge economy is education. It was fashionable at one stage to measure the success of education by growth in the gross domestic product in real terms. That seems somehow to have faded, and we take it as read that education is failing. But the truth is that if we return to that extremely sensible measure, we can see that our students, pupils, teachers and others working in education are deserving of our thanks and congratulations, rather than the brick-bats that are too often thrown at them. The growth of the knowledge economy on which our prosperity relies, now and in the future, is critically dependent on more and more people being educated to a higher level. The question is, does the Government's programme as we understand it measure up to what we require of it?

I have no problem with increasing the higher education intake. It has to be paid for, and we might need to return to the debate about how we do that and the part that student fees and the taxpayer have to play. Additional funding for further education institutions has assisted greatly in recreating the solid infrastructure of post-16 education that many in this House, of an older generation, took for granted before the Thatcher era.

Excellent progress has been made in pre-school and primary school education. We have thrown a lot of money at it, and perhaps value for money has not been everything that we would have wanted, but such progress is real and solid. Sure Start and the development of child centres are making a terrific contribution, certainly in my constituency, towards reducing inequalities. President Lyndon Johnson's 1960s head start programme for disadvantaged inner-city children, while ultimately proving politically unsustainable with the advent of the Nixon Administration, none the less provided a model on which programmes worldwide have been based, many of them successfully. Ours is headed in the same

[Mr. Ken Purchase]

successful direction, and I wish considerable success to all those involved in it nationwide and I offer many thanks for their work.

The Government's programme outlined today declares that education remains the main priority. There is a promise to improve choice on the back of further reform. It will be in the development of secondary education that the Government must expect to have to justify their plans, which appear seriously to compromise the ideals of comprehensive education.

The comprehensive school system has certain features that, if lost or compromised, make the delivery of its prime purpose extremely difficult. The prime purpose is to ensure that the opportunity to learn is available to all children of all abilities, crucially recognising that maturation rates vary considerably between the children of both the same and different sexes. Selection by any means that leads to the separation into different schools or institutions at a fixed moment in the process of maturation prevents an appropriate education from being delivered to an individual whose development may have accelerated or may be temporarily retarded. My concern is that the ideal of choice, so essential in the competitive world of retail consumerism, will be thrust into the world of education in an unreconstructed way, reducing what should be a carefully thought through decision that will affect the life chances of a child to the level of an impulse purchase—not this Purchase!

There is no doubt that choice in education is currently a cause of some concern. The area of the country with the widest choice of schools is London. It is unsurprising that London also has the greatest percentage of so-called failing schools. By the way, a mere 2.3 per cent. of London schools are judged to be failing—hardly the most difficult problem to manage that I have ever encountered. Certain schools are nevertheless branded failing schools and the biggest percentage is, as I said, in London. As choice grows—whether paid for directly in fees to a private institution or through people moving house to get their children into a school near the top of the league tables—the number of schools judged as failing will increase. The truth is that many of these failing schools are often working heroically against enormous and overwhelming odds. I do not believe that there is any serious evidence to suggest that more technology colleges, academies and grammar schools will somehow, by increasing competition for pupils, lift standards in disadvantaged areas where parents have neither the means nor the social skills to join an ever-faster race to the so-called best schools.

In the early 1970s, Rodney Lord, then working for Sir Keith Joseph in the Department of Education and Science, conducted research into the factors that most influenced educational outcomes. I shall not delay the House with details of his methodology; suffice it to say that what he discovered was what most of us knew then and know now—that the strongest influences were, first, the parents who had achieved in school themselves, and secondly, the proportion of experienced teachers present on the school payroll. That is unsurprising and pretty obvious, but should never be overlooked. I need to know from Ministers how schools with poorer catchments will be able to attract such parents and teachers in the face of competition from the proposed academy developments and all the ballyhoo with which they will be launched.

It seems to me fundamentally wrong that a business tycoon with £2 million to spare can become the master of the fate of perhaps thousands of youngsters, many with unsuspecting parents. Like many others in the House, I am frankly horrified that a religious crackpot—I do not apologise for the language—can take control of a secondary school and preach the discredited doctrine of creationism. The Education Minister in the House of Lords, who will be given the task of sorting out London's education, has a choice to make for himself. He can re-read Crosland and apply its values to modern London or he can regress towards the dame schools of the 19th century, when choice was abundant if you could afford the penny a day, but quality was abysmal.

Speaking for my constituency, I want to thank teachers, head teachers, assistants, nursery nurses and all the non-teaching staff who work hard to provide a good education that will allow young people to be part of a prosperous Britain. They should be capable of competing with the best, but also capable of understanding the values of co-operation and mutuality in our ever-smaller global community. For an overwhelming number of young people, the most important start that they have is a solid education delivered by dedicated teachers in an institution that does not exclude them from appropriate education either because they are the children of parents who are unable to grasp the importance of education or because certain subject specialties are not available on site.

The educational sociologist Bernstein said that education could not compensate for society—and he was, of course, correct. In the absence of a truly equal society, however, we have to make education work for all our children. That can be delivered, in my view, only through a modern comprehensive system of education.

7.46 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): First, I should like to say how much I enjoyed both the maiden speeches today. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) made a thought-provoking, non-partisan and excellent speech, and I also agree with the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) that the whole idea of choice in education has to be predicated on winners and losers. I could not agree with him more about that.

We have heard a fairly vague, but longish Queen's Speech today and we are promised some 46 Bills in 18 months. If anyone believes that, they should go and lie down. I believe that it will go the same way as the last Queen's Speech. It is packed full of goodies and baddies and packed full of stuff to make us think that Labour is now hitting the ground running. If we reflect on what is contained in it, hitting the ground running is a barely credible notion; indeed, it seems to me that the Queen's Speech is hardly even reaching the ground.

Before I get into a lather of criticism, I should like to mention one or two parts of the particular egg that may be palatable. The charities Bill is one, because I agree that charity law needs reforming. I approve of the Bills on common land and on consumer credit, though the

devil is always in the detail. I also agree that the corporate manslaughter Bill will recommend itself to the House. The child contact and inter-country adoption Bill and some other measures may be welcome.

There are also, Madam Deputy Speaker, some pretty awful measures in the Queen's Speech; in particular the incapacity benefit Bill. We are not journalists but mere politicians, so we do not know much about what will appear in that Bill. However, we do know from what the Secretary of State has already publicly said that he wants to move 1 million people from the incapacity benefit list on to something else. In other words, he wants to bring 1 million people into work. Like others in the House, I have no objection to people going to work when they should be working. I have no truck with that at all, but the carefully manufactured leaks over the weekend talk about "curbing" the payments to people receiving such benefits.

I feel somewhat worked up about this matter because a friend of mine, the late Mr. Gwyn Jones, received a letter on 11 March whose contents I shall explain. Mr. Jones lived in my village and was therefore my constituent. He had been terribly ill for 10 years, and in need of heart, lung and liver replacements. He varied from being extremely ill to being merely ill, and it was patently obvious that he would never work again. The letter was from Mr. Jones's "personal adviser" who was writing to arrange a meeting. It explained that the records showed that he had recently passed "a personal capability assessment", and went on to put pressure on Mr. Jones to attend the Dolgellau job centre the following Friday. Mr. Jones was on his deathbed when he received this letter, and passed away a few days later.

Needless to say, I am angry about that. If that is how payments are to be "curbed", I am more than just angry—I am disgusted. I hope that a Minister will tell the House what the Government's real intentions are. The soundbites give the impression that money will be taken off those who are the most vulnerable in society.

As I said, I do not object to people not being paid when they do not deserve it, but I want to repeat a point that I have made before. Since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have conducted hundreds of tribunal appeals on behalf of people turned down for incapacity benefit. Between 90 and 95 per cent. of those appeals succeeded. I am a barrister by profession and I like to think that I am a reasonable advocate, but I am not that good. The figure that I have quoted suggests to me that those applicants should not have been turned down in the first place.

Under the present system, general practitioners have to fill in a form on behalf of applicants. One young lad had been invalided out of the Royal Air Force after losing both a shoulder and a leg. Even so, the doctor involved in his case said that the lad could walk 100 m in a matter of seconds. That is an example of abuse, and if time permitted I could give many more examples. However, my point is that GPs—who are paid £125 or £130 for the few minutes that it takes them to fill in a form—often say that people are fit for work when it is clear that they are not. I do not care about the amount that the GPs are paid, but the system needs to be reformed.

To be fair to them, the Government have changed the basic form involved. A slightly more user-friendly version has been piloted in Glasgow, and I am pleased about that, but abuse by medical officers engaged by the Department is still widespread.

On the previous occasions that I have mentioned the problem, I expected to receive letters saying that I was ignorant and that I misunderstood the system. This is the third time that I have mentioned the matter on the Floor of the House, and not one GP has told me that I am wrong. To my way of thinking, that underlines that a real problem exists.

One of the big issues in Wales has to do with affordable housing. Real steps need to be taken to provide that, and a leak over the weekend suggested that some assistance would be extended to first-time buyers. I can see no such provision in the list of proposed Bills, but I hope that I am wrong. Housing is a major issue in Wales and the UK as a whole. We need to enable young people in particular to get on the housing ladder. That can be done through the use of part-ownership schemes, community land trusts, planning controls, the provision of social housing or the cheap sale by local authorities of land to community land trusts. It grieves me that young people in many parts of Wales never have a chance to live in their own community. That can never be right, but I am sure that the same problem is replicated throughout England and Scotland.

My party issued a consultation paper on housing a few months ago. I invite the House to have a look at it. We do not pretend to have all the answers, but we think that we have a few that might work.

The House will shortly debate the ID cards Bill again. I have never been convinced that ID cards are a good idea. A strange climate of fear was engendered last time the matter came up, which was intended to soften up opposition to the original Bill. That opposition was very strong in this House, and I believe that it will be so again.

We have been told that there are two main justifications for ID cards—that they will help in the fight against terrorism, and that they will contribute to the reduction of benefit and other fraud. The Government are at pains to stress that ID cards will be voluntary at first, but how will that assist in the apprehension of terrorists? The awful individuals who perpetrated the 9/11 atrocity and the Madrid bombings carried ID cards, so what justification for them can there be?

The first sentence of the initial Government consultation issued last year said that ID cards would not become compulsory. I believe that there has been a change since then and that, once introduced, such cards will inevitably become compulsory within a few years. Furthermore, if ID cards are so necessary in the fight against terrorism and if they are such a useful tool, what will happen in the 10 years or so that it will take to implement the legislation in full? The ID card system will cost billions of pounds, but could that money not be used more efficiently by putting more police officers on the street?

In addition, an ID card system will require a national database. How confident can we be that the necessary IT will be up to the job? I am sorry to say that the Government's record on IT is lamentable given the

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serial failures of the Child Support Agency systems and a similar failure at the Department for Work and Pensions. Are we not heading for another costly and damaging IT disaster, and to what purpose?

One fascinating aspect of the ID cards debate is that no Minister has ever explained how such cards could combat terrorism. We are still waiting for that explanation.

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that one consequence of a failure of technology in respect of ID cards would be that innocent people would be held to ransom, not guilty people?

Mr. Llwyd: I agree. Terrorists are very sophisticated, and will manufacture everything that they need. Moreover, Government figures show that it is expected that ID cards will save only 5 per cent. of benefit fraud in any given year, so that justification is a non-starter as well.

In 1996, the report from the Scarman Centre looked at the use of ID cards in Europe. It found that in Germany, the Netherlands and France, people from ethnic minority groups were stopped for card inspections disproportionately often. Are we therefore looking at the reintroduction of a form of the sus law in this country? I certainly hope not.

In conclusion, my party believes that ID cards are illiberal, irrelevant, expensive and unproven, and that they have no place in our society. We will be happy to campaign against the proposal alongside all other parties that feel the same way.

The Queen's Speech contains a reference to a government of Wales Bill. We do not know what that Bill proposes, so I shall reserve judgment. However, I wager that it does not contain any provision to establish a Parliament for Wales, which is what my party wants. The commission chaired by the eminent Labour peer Lord Richard QC sat for 18 months and recently reported. All political parties were represented on the commission, and many of the participants began as agnostics on the matter. Even so, the commission unanimously stated that the National Assembly for Wales was not working. It made it clear that the only way forward was to give it the full legislative powers that are enjoyed by the Scottish Parliament.

A White Paper is to be issued later this summer and it is vital that it implements the Richard commission proposals in full. It would be wrong to withhold law-making powers from the people of Wales simply because a handful of Labour Back-Bench Members were afraid of losing their seats.

Lembit Öpik: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Llwyd: No, I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman has not contributed to the debate, but has merely intervened twice already. I am sorry, but other people wish to speak. If he were prepared to sit through a whole debate, I might be prepared to take an intervention.

To return to my theme, the National Assembly is in favour of an anti-smoking Bill, but it wants to make regulations and to decide which places can waive the need for it. The Bill will say that it is possible to exempt certain places from the general law. By the end of 2007, all enclosed public places and workplaces will be smoke free, except some licensed premises. The National Assembly for Wales is unanimous in wanting the right to decide where those places should be. As things stand, my understanding—more importantly, the Assembly's understanding and that of the Chairs of the appropriate Committees and all the political parties—is that that will be done here. That undermines the whole devolution process, and I ask Ministers to respond on that important point.

There are things to commend in the Queen's Speech, but there are also matters of considerable concern, and I believe that they will give rise to huge debate in the coming weeks and months.

8 pm

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), who has obviously given some thought to his speech. I have to say, however, that I did not agree with much of it, because I do not think that the mandate received by the Government supports his position. Of course, I respect his right to continue to challenge the Government's position, but it is important to note where we have come from.

Before he slips out of the Chamber, I am pleased to congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Mr. Murphy), on his well deserved promotion. The fact that he is therefore no longer my Whip will mean that he is not on my back all the time, which is very helpful. We may again strike up the friendly relationship we used to have before he went to the Whips Office.

I have been interested in many contributions today and have enjoyed being in the Chamber for them. I would like to hire the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and to take him round all the constituencies in Scotland to prove two things. First, even when I am in my loud tie phase, when I go out jazzing, I do not wear ties as bad as his. Secondly, if he keeps up as he did today, we will be returned with a massively increased majority at the next election. His was the best speech, and I shall take it away to frighten every member of my electorate who did not vote against the Conservatives at the election. The Conservatives came fourth in my new constituency, for the first time. They were put there by the Liberal Democrats, who came third.

In my constituency, we had debates on the hustings, and the general tenor was respectful and humorous. At the end of the day, we all felt our opponents had not dropped into the positions that some of the national leaders of the parties did as they conducted the election. Our electorate appreciated that. The question is: how we did it. Even the Conservative candidate had been against the Iraq war in the public prints for a number of years, so everyone on our platform was against the war and we all had things to say about it. I am sure I shall have things to say about it here in future. In Linlithgow and East Falkirk, I took over 75 per cent. of the

constituency of the former Father of the House, Tam Dalyell, and added it to 65 per cent. of my own old constituency. In fact, Labour won there: despite what people may have thought about his particular fixations on certain topics, the spirit of Tam Dalyell was in fact the true spirit of Labour. I am sure that that was helped by the fact that he is married to Kathleen Wheatley, Lord Wheatley's daughter. They are very much at the centre of what people who vote Labour wanted in the constituency. The notional majority was 11,500, and I held it with 11,200. That shows that there is a clear commitment to a Labour vote in the area. People are looking for certain things from the Labour Government, and I hope that we can deliver for them.

I echo concerns expressed about turnout. I repeat something I have said ever since I was elected: we have to bring in compulsory voting in the United Kingdom. Some 10 years ago, I went with a Select Committee to Australia to talk to its election commission, and I was impressed by its universal system under which anyone can vote at any point in the country some weeks ahead of the election and then be registered as having voted back in their home constituency. My son lives in Brisbane now, and he took advantage of that at the last election. Although victory went to the Liberals, he still felt he had participated.

People have the choice in that system to say, "None of the above". They do not have to vote for one of the parties, but they do have to use their democratic right to vote. We should look seriously at that, and I do not know why people are afraid of it. Perhaps it is because everyone can, as they have done today, stand up and say, "Although you got more votes than us, we won", or "Although we got more votes than you, we didn't win", or "We did really well compared with where we were before", as the Liberal Democrats always say. The reality is, though, that they are not the Government, and if the system were based on everyone having to vote, everyone could see that the result was the will of the people, which we can never quite be sure about in our electoral system at the moment.

So, how did we do? We have a third successive Labour Government, and a monumental task and a tremendous challenge and opportunity lie ahead for that Government, with many mandates. We put a concise document to the public, but one packed with promises and commitments. People chose those commitments. I was struck by the number of times elderly people came up to me in the constituency and said, on pensions, "I have never been better off." That happened again and again. I originally wanted pensions linked to earnings, but it is clear that what we did, using pension credit and the minimum income guarantee, has lifted a vast number of pensioners out of hardship and given a brightness to their future that they did not expect.

We must move forward. I certainly support the idea that everyone in future should be compelled to pay into a pension scheme at their place of work. The firm should pay in, and the employee should pay in. Anyone who argues against that from the business side is trying to find a way out of paying people a decent wage so that they can afford to make a compulsory contribution to their future when they retire. I hope that the Government will look seriously at that.

There is a mandate for ID cards, despite what the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said. I put ID cards on the pledge card that I put out in my own name and with my photograph on it. I took it up every single time at the hustings. We talked about it seriously in sensible discussions, and about 75 per cent. of people saw no problem with it. It does not matter whether ID cards are just about combating terrorism. It is sensible that people should be able to produce an identity card containing a biometric statement, and as we said in the manifesto:

"We will introduce ID cards, including biometric data like fingerprints, backed up by a national register".

The manifesto also says the scheme will be rolled out initially on a voluntary basis, but it should eventually be compulsory. It should substitute for a passport when we go around the European Union. It should be capable of being put through a scanner so that people can be identified.

I see fraud all the time in my constituency. People I know came as visitors, then sent their passports back to their country of origin where they were stamped for a fee by a corrupt official. They remain in this country. There is no way of challenging that, except by using sleuths to find those people out. If they had to prove who they were and what right they had to be here, it would stop fraud.

I have twice had parts of my identity stolen. Once, a bank did not even check the electoral register and gave someone of a different name a credit card at my address. I had to stop that myself. I do not know whether the person was ever prosecuted. It is easy to steal people's identity, but more difficult to do so if there is a proper chip system in an identity card. It is time we brought that in.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, East (Mr. Marshall) mentioned our commitment to the Post Office. Our manifesto commitment is that we

"have no plans to privatise it."

But the manifesto also says:

"We will review the impact on the Royal Mail of market liberalisation".

I am fed up with two things. One is Ministers saying, "It's not my responsibility, guv. It is the regulator's". The other is the regulator saying that he does not have to take into account the concerns of the consumer, just the concerns of the Competition Commission. Services are about people, especially public services. The private sector has to face up to the fact that it does not answer to people, as in the financial sector which has been ripping people off in this country for at least the last decade and probably for longer through the use of hedge funds and other dodges it gets up to. It is ripping off the investor, as Equitable Life did, and we need to stop that by making Ministers, rather than some second-hand regulator, responsible for how services run.

It has not been said in the House—but it should be—that the major Opposition party in the election had a scurrilous, shameful tone to its campaign on immigration that deeply damaged our communities, whether they have few people with other ethnic origins or many. People now live in fear of persecution, and it was a shameful thing to do. It was a parallel of what happened in Australia, which my son explained in some detail to me. The Aboriginals were scapegoated, as were people from Asia, who had provided tremendous

[Michael Connarty]

benefits to Australia. That scaremongering worked in Australia, but through the good grace of the British people it did not work here. Instead, it damaged the Conservative party, which will not live it down for a long time—at least, for as long as I can stand up and remind them of the shameful behaviour of its leader and other party members during the election.

We must now stabilise the situation. We are committed to introducing a Bill on immigration, and it is important—as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) said—to distinguish between immigration and asylum. Illegal immigration, and the trafficking and smuggling of people, is now more lucrative than smuggling drugs for the cartels that run such operations. We are a target for their activities, as are many other countries that may provide a better economic future. Some people are trafficked to be abused or for prostitution, but many volunteer to be trafficked. Their families use all their wealth to buy a passage, by a clandestine route, to this or some other country. We have to work out how to stop that, because it must be our target, not the few individuals who drift in for a wedding, stay on and then eventually get caught and sent home.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) said, we also have to calm the fears of the people who live in large ethnic minority communities and have contributed greatly to this country, but who now feel the target—a legitimate target, according to some—of a form of xenophobia and racism that has always underlain the English personality. England has never decided what sort of country it is, and that is where the problems arise most often.

We must prevent exploitation of immigrants. Illegal immigrants—Chinese and other Asians—are exploited regularly, but so are legal immigrant groups, such as Lithuanians, Poles and Indian graduates. The latter are being treated appallingly in some areas. They are paid very poorly and forced to live in crowded circumstances while working in hotel chains in Scotland. We must give those people the same wages and rights as other workers in this country; otherwise, our workers will complain about jobs being taken by people who undercut them and we will also have immigrants to this country being abused.

I hope that the Government will find a way to prevent immigrant families with children from being incarcerated. We have fought a campaign in Scotland and now families with children are put into Dungavel detention centre, the former prison, for only a few days. That should be repeated throughout the country. I hope that we will prevent abuse and, at the same time, encourage and applaud those legal immigrants who come to our country.

My second major topic is incapacity benefit reform. We made it clear in the manifesto that we would do something about that. The tone was at times not acceptable to me, but it was in the manifesto and we have won a mandate on it. We said:

"We will help people who can work into rehabilitation and eventually into employment . . . We will build on the successful Pathways to Work programme and reform Incapacity Benefit".

My worry is that we will reform incapacity benefit before we create the pathways. I made the point before the election that the yellow brick road has not reached my constituency yet. However, we have had the proposal to shut down the job centre in the hardest hit area of my constituency. That does not make any sense. We cannot on the one hand take away people's access and on the other promise to find them a way back into work. Everyone deserves the dignity of work and an adequate reward for that work.

I worry about some reports we heard before the election that Ministers, even the Prime Minister, intended to end people's ability to lounge on benefits. Well, I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, East describe the effect on some wards in his constituency with unemployment rates of more than 50 per cent. There is a cloud over communities in areas hit by economic inactivity, such as those in West Lothian, outside Livingston. Job losses started under the Conservatives and continued under our Government. The people's lifestyles are debilitated, because they have to live on benefits or very poor pay. In the communities that I have inherited in West Lothian, unemployment has fallen by only 27 per cent., but it has fallen by 37 per cent. in communities around Livingston and 39 per cent. in my former constituency. I phoned the enterprise company the day after the election, after about four hours' sleep, to ask what we could do. I was told that there was no problem, because the area had the same average unemployment as Edinburgh's, at 2 per cent. I do not know what planet that company lives on, but it does not know the communities in Armadale and Whitburn. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, East said, it is economic inactivity that is the problem—how many people have not got jobs but are not on the register. They are not registered so they do not count in the eyes of the enterprise companies. Those people can be written off, and that was done by the Thatcher and Major Governments. We have to solve that problem. After all, the Labour party is pledged to support working people. The first posters for the Keir Hardie Government said that the Labour party was the party for all who work—I have the centenary banner—and that is what we should still be. The pathway must come to every community before the benefits are cut. We should use a carrot, not a stick. It will not be Back Benchers who rebel—the Government have a mandate for the Bill and we will not know how it will affect people until it rolls out—but the communities I represent. They will march on the job centres and take on the Government, and they will not vote for us at the next election, when we should win an historic fourth term.

When it comes to the European Union, we should be better at scrutiny. In the last Parliament, the CBI criticised us for letting too many matters through without proper scrutiny. I have sat on the European Scrutiny Committee for the past seven years, but we were not the problem. The problem, the chief executive of the CBI said, was other Members who did not take the process seriously. He was right. That is why we ended up having to fight a rearguard action on REACH—the registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals—which could have destroyed the chemical industry in this country and probably throughout the whole of Europe. We have to fight many battles after the event, because Parliament does not pay attention to what is happening in the Council of Ministers and does not scrutinise what comes out of Europe properly. I hope that that will be improved in this Parliament.

Should France vote yes—I hope that it will—we will have a massive opportunity to repair some of the damage done in the election by the tone of the talk about immigrants. The treaty is for 25 countries, 10 of which were recently behind the wall of a dominant communist regime. Those countries want to be a full part of the European Union and if we do not have this treaty, we will have to guddle along with the wrong weighting of votes. The new countries would not be able to mould a new system that suits them as well as us. I agreed with the leader of the Liberal Democrats when he said that we should work together. As he pointed out, 58 per cent. of people were in favour of the treaty and wanted us to move back to the centre of Europe. I hope that the Prime Minister sees the chance to underpin his legacy by taking us back to the centre of Europe through a new treaty that provides a working model that will keep the European Union stable for the next 10 years.

Bulgaria is probably ready for membership, although I am not so sure about Romania, which we visited just before the election. I know that deals have been done so that it can join in 2007 at the latest, but it has a long way to go and we must press it hard to make itself fit for membership. I hope their Government will take that seriously and that the process is not about giving America—rather than the UN—a base in Romania, rather than bringing Romania into an enlarged EU for a sensible reason.

There are two personal campaigns that I hope will be taken forward during the Government's next term. I am the chairman of the all-party group on haemophilia and I am concerned about the payments given to people suffering from hepatitis C. The bereaved families of people with hepatitis C who died after receiving contaminated blood products should be included in the scheme. They are not at present. The Government give ex gratia payments—they do not call it compensation—of £20,000 for people with hepatitis C and £25,000 if the person has cancer of the liver or another serious complication, but it was a shameful decision not to give those payments to the families of those who died after contracting hepatitis C from contaminated blood products. That was unsustainable and immoral. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Government should not have been buying contaminated blood from US blood banks that took supplies from drug addicts and people in jail. In the other place, Lord Morris described that as the single greatest medical blunder of the century of any Government. That is true. The plasma was extracted from those products and given to people in this country causing HIV and hepatitis C. Recently, people have been infected with CJD prions from the same contaminated products. It would cost only a small amount to deal with that shameful omission, and I hope that the Government will do so.

Finally, I want the Government to take action on Palestine. A wall is being thrown around people; it does not just go around the green line but into Palestinian enclaves. In my constituency, we have the Antonine wall and we have just twinned with the town of Jayous, which is cut in half by a wall. The inhabitants are not allowed to leave by gate 25, which is permanently locked. Lemons are falling to the ground and rotting. The Israeli Government are denying people their livelihood. If we want a settlement, there must be real autonomy for two nations—the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. We must stop the Israelis from preventing British Gas developing Gaza gas, an offshore field that would bring money to the Palestinian people in Gaza and help them to rebuild their economy.

I hope all those things can be carried through by the Government. It was a splendid Queen's Speech, and we were elected on an excellent manifesto.

8.22 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I remind the House of my interests recorded in the previous register.

I join in congratulating you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your reappointment and I congratulate all Members who have made maiden speeches today. I look forward to a return speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Evennett). If it is of any comfort to him, when I returned as Member for Sevenoaks the manager of my local tyre depot gave me the following advice: a retread is perfectly serviceable provided that it is correctly balanced. I am sure that my hon. Friend's speech will be correctly balanced and we look forward to hearing from him.

I begin with a complaint, which will be obvious to the House from my earlier intervention: that we in the House were not provided with the 200-page detailed guide to the Queen's Speech, describing precisely the provisions of the various Bills. My hon. Friends will be astounded to learn that it even includes 30 pages about 14 Bills that were not mentioned in the Queen's Speech but that will probably be brought forward. I see no reason why that 200-page guide should have been provided to the parliamentary Press Gallery at 9 o'clock this morning but not to Members of the House this afternoon. It may be beyond your power to deal with such things, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I should be grateful if the matter could be noted so that we avoid that problem on a future occasion.

It was a big Queen's Speech, which is fitting for the style of big government. I did not find in it much humility or much sense of listening from the Prime Minister. The solutions that were rolled out have been tried and tested over the past eight years—more Acts of Parliament, more controls and more spending. They are the same solutions that have not worked over the last eight years. We have already had Act after Act redefining antisocial behaviour and recriminalising petty offences.

However, as I think the Prime Minister recognised at the end of his speech, Acts of Parliament cannot on their own create a civil society; only we can do that in our communities. We cannot be directed or controlled to do so. The British response to the tsunami disaster earlier this year was a good example of that. When the tidal wave struck, the Government were on holiday, but the public were not. Without being told what to do or directed how to respond—perhaps indeed because they were not told what to do or directed how to respond—people came forward in their thousands and donated in their millions, leaving Ministers struggling to catch up. It is exactly the same with the Queen's Speech. I have a sense of the Government flailing around, chasing superbugs, closing failing schools, banning hoodies and all the rest of it, without proposing a proper programme.

There are three central failures in the Government's programme: a lack of substance behind the campaign to restore respect; the fact that reforms in our public

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[Mr. Michael Fallon]

services are still not real and radical; and the fact that the Queen's Speech does not tackle some of the serious issues that Parliament should be confronting.

I begin with respect. So far, it is simply a Government slogan. We cannot create respect by Act of Parliament, by creating lots more criminal offences. I say to Ministers that if respect is missing it is because the balance is wrong. It is because the Government have created far too many rights but insisted on far too few responsibilities. Through signing up to European rights and human rights, they have opened up the flood gates to claims against public bodies—against our hospitals, our schools and our teachers. A person can sue their NHS trust, but their general practitioner or consultant cannot sue them for not turning up for their appointment. When so many NHS appointments are missed I can see no reason why we do not impose a refundable charge to make people take more responsibility. They would value the free NHS more if they had to take that responsibility.

It is the same with schools. It is all very well to say that parents can change the management of schools, but head teachers cannot enforce anything. The home-to-school contracts that the Government rightly promoted are not enforceable. Parents have a right to a place of education and to some preference, but there is no corresponding duty on them to produce their child on time, with homework done, fresh and ready to be taught. Where is the Bill that will give heads and schools power over admissions and that places a proper duty on parents? Where is the Bill that will deal with school discipline?

We are to be confronted with two massive education Bills, but the background briefing on the main education Bill simply says:

> "We will remove barriers to learning by continuing our zero-tolerance approach to poor behaviour."

If for the past eight years we have had zero tolerance of school behaviour, it is time that the Secretary of State and her Ministers went out into schools more and saw what teachers have to put up with. We must redress that balance. I would like home-to-school contracts to be made properly enforceable. I would like parents to be required to put down a deposit on a school place, which would be refundable when their child finally left school but would give them a stake in the education service and help them to value the service that they get.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking with his usual mix of perspicacity and wisdom. Will he elaborate on this point? The Prime Minister has now alighted on the word "respect", which has just a hint of gangster rap about it. Would he not do better to speak about obligation, duty and responsibility, in the way that my hon. Friend has? As my hon. Friend said, those begin at home, and they obviously carry through to school. Would not the legislative programme be better framed in those terms than in the vague terms that the Prime Minister is using?

Mr. Fallon: That must be absolutely right. I believe that it is the undermining of responsibility among families—among parents—that has led to a lack of respect. I shall not elaborate in great detail because others want to speak, but the problem lies not just in our schools and our public services, but also in our court system. Little has been done over the past eight years to make criminal justice local, rapid, public and efficient. Fines that are not paid are simply waived. A Government cannot say that they will restore respect unless they redress the balance between rights and responsibilities.

I could go into every area of the public service, but I will not do so tonight. Let us simply consider the planning system. Nothing in the Queen's Speech restores confidence and respect in the planning system. The Secretary of State can simply overrule my district council, which wants to protect a famous local pub, The Farmers, and Travellers can continue to abuse the green belt by submitting wholly bogus applications for retrospective planning permission. We need to redress the balance.

Secondly, there is still a lack of real reform. Let me give the House just one example. We all lived through the fire service dispute. As part of that agreement, over two years ago, it was agreed that we would move to a system of regional fire control centres. Personally, I am not in favour of that—I would like to see my fire control centre stay in Kent—but that was the Government's policy two years ago. Today, only one of those fire control centres has even been identified, let alone built and opened.

The deployment of our teaching force, and of our police force, is still a matter for collective negotiation—for centralised bargaining, rather than for head teachers or area police commanders, and as a result we find schoolchildren washing around shopping centres at 3.15 in the afternoon, and we find the public not getting the police presence that they want. The Prime Minister lamented it today, but he has been in charge for eight years.

What happened to local pay? When, on Wednesdays, I read the *Guardian* supplement, *The Guardian Society*, that "Almanach de Gotha" of public sector recruitment, I see no reference to local variations, local rates, and local terms and conditions. Instead, we still have centrally agreed terms and collective agreements.

Thirdly, the big issues have simply been spurned. There was nothing substantial in the Queen's Speech or in the Government briefing about pensions reform. That is perhaps not surprising; there was nothing in the Labour manifesto about pensions reform. There is no serious action on the biggest threat to economic security that our people faced. When we debated the Pensions Bill last summer in the House, I warned that for the private sector, the Pension Protection Fund would quickly and easily be overwhelmed. I still think that it will be. For the rest, we have the Turner commission, seemingly sitting for ever.

The problem is obvious. People in the private sector need to save more, earlier, and the Government need to make up their mind, after eight years, how to encourage them to do that. We can no longer defend the advantage that those in the public sector have—this applies to us as well as to the rest of the public service—through a final salary scheme, the cost of which appears on no public sector balance sheet and which discriminates. In the end, we must find a better way of remunerating those in the

public service while encouraging them to make more private provision for their pensions on an equal basis with the private sector.

The education element of the Queen's Speech is sadly lacking. I am concerned about the serial and surreptitious closure of so many university departments after years of underfunding. The matter has not been debated enough. I suspect that the solution that the Government have come up with, which they have not yet implemented, of tuition fees next year, will give us the worst of all worlds—a tuition fee that does not increase to any significant degree overall university income. I certainly intend to watch the effect, as we approach the start.

Another issue is the continuing underachievement in our schools. Someone spoke earlier today as though all secondary schools were marvellous success stories. I can tell my hon. Friends that we in Sevenoaks enjoy very good specialist and grammar schools, as well as a good choice of independent schools, but that choice is not available to many of our citizens, particularly those in the larger cities. The scale of underachievement in inner London is quite striking.

Across inner London, 52.8 per cent. of pupils do not achieve a minimum of five A-to-C grade GCSEs. In some boroughs—Haringey, Southwark and Westminster—things are far worse. That is a massive indictment of all the billions of pounds that the Government have poured into secondary education. City academies, the right to change school management and all the rest are not really the answer.

I believe personally that, in inner London, where local education authorities have failed so badly, we need to put real power into the hands of parents. In a homogenous area, where travel is easy and there is no particularly affinity with a badly run local council, I do not understand why we do not introduce a city-wide education voucher. A third-term Government of whichever party ought to be a bit more radical about that.

The final omission from the Queen's Speech is any serious measure to deal with productivity. In that respect, I agree with the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase). When the Chancellor appeared before the Treasury Committee just before the election, I asked him whether he had got anything wrong during the past eight years, but my hon. Friends will not be surprised to learn that he did not "fess up". However, he said that productivity was the one issue that he wished he could do more about, and he is right.

United Kingdom productivity, measured by gross domestic product per worker, is still 20 per cent. behind that of the United States. Even on the other measure—GDP per hour worked—it is still 14 per cent. behind the United States. It is behind not China or the far east, but the United States. Instead of tackling that problem, the Government have allowed us to slide further towards the continental economic model, with more and more social regulation and higher taxes.

These are the Government's failures: they are failing to match property rights with responsibilities, to drive through real reform of the public services and to tackle the really big issues. That gives us the opportunity to frame our response in more aspirational terms—and, if I may say so to those on the Conservative Front Bench, perhaps in more aspirational terms than we managed to use during the general election campaign. It may have been practical and desirable, but bringing back matron was not particularly aspirational. It ought to be possible—I hope that it will be possible under a new leader—for us to propose a better, more aspirational framework that encourages responsibility, while protecting the vulnerable and keeping taxes low.

8.38 pm

Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): It is a great privilege, honour and opportunity for me to speak after eight years having been out of this place, and it is pleasure to be here and to debate the Loyal Address and the Queen's Speech. I represented Erith and Crayford until 1997. I am now privileged to represent Bexleyheath and Crayford, which is 40 per cent. of my old parliamentary seat, with the addition of Bexleyheath. During the time that I have been out of the House I have been at the front line of teaching. I have been a lecturer in a further education college and, subsequently, a freelance, so I have seen at first hand the real world, particularly in relation to education, and I shall come to that a little later.

I wish to begin by paying a compliment to my defeated opponent, Nigel Beard, who I succeed as the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford. I highlight the interest that he took in Treasury and economic matters in his eight years in the House. He served as a member of the Treasury Committee and participated fully in its deliberations. He was a man of considerable experience in science and technology and served on the Select Committee on Science and Technology when he first came into the House in 1997, having had a career as a scientist with ICI Zeneca. I pay him tribute.

The constituency of Bexleyheath and Crayford is part of Greater London. It is located in south-east London and is on the borders with Kent. It is a very good place for getting into London and out into the Kent countryside. It is part of the London borough of Bexley and a great place to live and work. It has tremendous shopping opportunities in Bexleyheath Broadway and Crayford town, and there are also a wide variety of smaller shopping centres such as those at Pickford lane, Long lane and Midfield parade. They have good local shops and the area also provides good opportunities, with cinemas, restaurants, golf courses, a Superbowl and numerous beautiful parks and open spaces, such as the one at Martens grove near where I live in Barnehurst and Hall Place mansion and gardens that are of Elizabethan and Jacobean origins. Crayford also has a lot of history. It has been an historical site since Roman times and there is an historic church on Watling street. More recently, there have been interesting historical developments with the defence industry contractors Vickers.

Despite my constituency's location and its environmental attractions for residents, it still faces real problems—problems that I had hoped would have been addressed in the Government's programme as set out in the Queen's Speech. During the election campaign and over the past few years, there has been increasing concern about quality of life issues in my borough and more generally. As we heard on the doorsteps in the campaign, the biggest concern is, without doubt, the

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problems caused by crime, antisocial behaviour, vandalism and graffiti. Our area has been plagued with increasing problems in that respect and they cause real concern.

In the evenings—particularly Friday and Saturday evenings—in Bexleyheath, groups of youths engage in binge drinking, intimidation and abuse. That means that many residents, particularly the elderly, are not willing to go into the town to enjoy the facilities and opportunities provided by the restaurants and the cinema. They are worried about the gangs of youths that gather and are sometimes drunk. Those problems are also faced by families who wish to go out in the evening.

Those problems are not just in Bexleyheath—they are in Crayford town and in the shopping centres that I have mentioned. Gangs of youths misbehave and engage in threatening and abusive behaviour, so I was delighted to see in the Queen's Speech that the Government

"is committed to creating safe and secure communities, and fostering a culture of respect."

Great words, but what do they actually mean in terms of action for my constituents? As my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) has highlighted, "respect" is a wonderful word—but if the commitment is not backed up, what use is it on Friday and Saturday nights in my constituency?

The stories that I hear are distressing and infuriating. At my first surgery last Friday, a business man came in who was worried about the behaviour of youths, and pensioners told me about their concerns about graffiti and so forth. Other members of my constituency have tales of considerable concern. A particularly worrying case involved a lady who came home late one evening with her husband. As they were walking home from Welling, they were verbally abused by drunken youths. That is not the sort of society that we want. We want respect brought back and such people dealt with. Of course, we know that problems can come from the home and that people have responsibilities, but if we go down the route of increasing disrespect, where will we end up?

I am worried about the 24-hour licensing that will be brought in during the autumn, although it was introduced during the previous Parliament. I wonder whether that will cause more antisocial behaviour in places such as Bexleyheath, which is a magnet for people from Kent, Essex and south London, and whether it will lead to an increasing problem of growing disrespect and binge drinking. Naturally, I am extremely worried about the situation.

Crime and antisocial behaviour were the main issues on the doorstep in Bexleyheath and Crayford during the general election campaign, but several local issues of concern were also raised. Transport is a big issue in my area. We have no underground, yet a large commuter contingent needs to get into town to work and go to their places of business. We are naturally worried that the rail service running through the constituency is not up to the standard that we would like. It is poor and has deteriorated over recent years. Proposals have recently been made to cut out the service to Victoria via Bexleyheath. We have been campaigning to maintain the service because the proposals would cause difficulties for not only commuters but pensioners and families, because they would have to change trains at Lewisham to get to Victoria. We hope that the authorities will heed our campaign and not cut the Victoria service. We are also worried about the possibility of a reduced service on the line to Cannon Street and Charing Cross. We must have a decent service in the area.

A further worry that came up during the general election campaign—it is my major concern—was the proposed Thames Gateway bridge. That matter causes significant concern throughout my constituency and the borough. I am against the bridge as it is proposed because it would cause a huge increase in traffic throughout the borough, and in my constituency especially. One of our problems is the number of juggernauts, cars and lorries on local roads and the consequent congestion in my area. We are plagued by traffic in Bexley and the Thames Gateway bridge would make the situation worse because juggernauts and large lorries would use Danson road, Brampton road, Long lane and Knee hill as a cut through from the A2 if the bridge were built. I am worried not only that residents in the area would have the nightmare and nuisance of noise and suffer environmental consequences, but that the value of their properties would diminish and their quality of life would decline. I hope to pursue several local issues over the next few months as we go through the measures in the Queen's Speech.

Of course we welcome several aspects of the speech. We are pleased to support some measures, but others are vague and woolly. Several of my hon. Friends have highlighted the vagueness and generality of the measures in the Queen's Speech, although I, too, have not been privileged to see the press pack containing more detailed information.

As a trained teacher and someone who has been in education for the past eight years, I am worried about the value for money that we are getting from our education system. I am also concerned that too many children leave school without the qualifications that they need to be able to live a rich and fulfilled life. I shall consider education carefully during my time here and participate in debates on Bills. Education is important, not just for an individual's future but for the country's future. Hopefully, well educated children will learn respect and have an important part to play in society. Perhaps we can diminish the antisocial behaviour, the binge drinking and the problems of yob culture within our society. Education is a passport to success and a good future. Conservative Members should give careful consideration to the Government's proposals on education. In the past eight years, we have had a Government who talk an awful lot, but there has not been a lot of action. Certainly, money has gone into education, but standards have not improved.

We are fortunate in Bexley because we have a good education system. We have kept grammar schools and have real choice and diversity in our education provision. We have a wide variety of technical schools, single-sex schools and church schools, as well as our grammar schools and some good comprehensives, but we have to look to the future—to where we are going. We need to ensure that we get value for money and that our young people get a real opportunity for the future. Therefore, I shall look carefully at the Government's education Bills when they are presented to the House and when we debate them.

Aspects of the Queen's Speech offer us opportunities, but there are great disappointments too. It is a privilege for me to be back in the House and to be able to participate in it, but the Queen's Speech is thin and the opportunities that have been missed are considerable. The Opposition will do all that we can to ensure that the issues raised by my constituents during the election campaign, and those that we feel passionate about, are raised with great enthusiasm here. We will hold the Government to account.

8.51 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford—and/or Erith—(Mr. Evennett) back to the House. We are pleased to see him and congratulate him on his born-again maiden speech. May I also say that I enjoyed the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), who made important incisive comments?

On the first day of a new Parliament, it is fitting for all Members to recall who sent them here. I register my thanks to the good people of Blaby for returning me to my fourth Parliament. I hope that it was an expression of trust. It may have reflected the fact that C came before L on the list when it came to deciding whether to vote Conservative or Labour. Nevertheless, I felt that it was an expression of trust and I am grateful to them. I shall serve all people of my constituency, whichever way they voted, or even if they did not vote, to the best of my ability for the next four or five years.

The election was not a triumph for the Conservatives. We all know that. One must congratulate the Government on being returned to office. I think that it was unwise of the electorate, but the people have, indeed, spoken. However, it was not a triumph for any party. The Government saw their majority savagely reduced. The Conservatives increased their numbers, but we did not win. I think that the Liberal Democrats saw their vote reduced overall. They got a few extra seats, but they did not do particularly well. No one should pretend that it was a great triumph. It was not a great triumph for democracy when the turnout remained so low.

There is much in the Queen's Speech, with 40-odd Bills, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford said, it is curiously thin for one with so much in it. I shall dwell on a few points that arise from it. First, however, I am struck by the fact that far from relishing victory, we see empty Labour Benches on the first day of the new Parliament. Where are Labour Members? Why are they not here, relishing the fact that they are back in government? We find ourselves in the dire dog days of this Administration. The Under-Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs laughs, but where are her Members? She was a Whip and should have ensured that a few people at least showed an interest in the Parliament to which they have been returned. These are, without a doubt, the Prime Minister's twilight days. He has said that these are his last days, although we do not know whether they will last three and a half years or four, three months or six months.

It is extraordinary that, whereas we have returned enthusiastic for the fray, Labour Members do not look as though they are keen on joining in. That is partly because, under the present Prime Minister, new Labour has promised so much and achieved so little. That has spread the cynicism that has led to low turnouts, and the dissatisfaction with the system that we all saw in people's reactions on the doorstep.

We have heard a lot about education. Why, after eight years of a Labour Government and with huge amounts of extra money put into the education system—I do not criticise that—is a higher proportion of children now going into private education than has since the Butler Education Act of 1944? Why are more people than ever before opting for private health care and private operations for which they have to pay themselves rather than through insurance? In the Queen's Speech, we are promised another immigration Bill—is that the fourth or the fifth? Why do we need it? It is because the Government have created a huge mess in the immigration and asylum systems. Famously, the Prime Minister has not got a clue how many failed asylum seekers are in this country.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks and for Bexleyheath and Crayford referred to that part of the Queen's Speech that says that the Government are determined to foster "a culture of respect" in our society. That sounds good—although no one knows what it means—but who destroyed respect? Why is there so little respect in our society now? That is a complex issue and I do not claim to have all the answers. I suspect that many people are responsible, not least the media, but I suggest that there is a connection between deference and respect. What we have now is a culture of rights in which there is no deference, no respect and no responsibilities, as we have heard. Ali G and his "respect" and "gangsta rap", as I believe it is called, is perhaps what many young people think of when one talks of respect. Personally, I respect each individual for his value as a human being—each person is valued in the sight of God and should be valued in society, too, whatever they do. However, it seems to me that the liberal left has reduced respect by denigrating so many institutions in this country. We need only look at the empty Benches opposite to understand that.

I remember Peter Mandelson, when he was a Cabinet Minister, in that chattering class way laughing about the "chinless wonders" in our armed forces. I do not think that he ever apologised for that. Perhaps he should have. Today on the television, Lord Hattersley was sneering quietly about the fact that we had a state opening of Parliament, because he is a republican. The House of Lords has been reformed, but I am not sure that it is a better place. Grammar schools are denigrated and under attack from the Government. Under the Labour-Liberal coalition, property rights in Scotland have been subjected to astonishing attack, and the right to roam attacks property rights in this country as well. The fault is not entirely on one side, but the problem is one of reducing respect for other people and their property.

Over the past eight years—in fact, over the past 40 years—we have seen the fostering of the culture of rights. The 10-year-old who tells a police constable who remonstrates with him, "I know my rights—don't you lay a finger on me," is a deeply worrying phenomenon. That culture is backed up by the so-called Human Rights Act 1998. Human rights sound marvellous, but the Act, against which some of us warned eight years ago, has contributed to the lack of respect and the yob

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culture that all of us are now supposed to turn against. For an example, let us take Travellers. They know their rights, they know about human rights and they know about legal challenges, but in my constituency just before the election they were defecating on the doorsteps of law-abiding citizens.

So-called modernising also reduces respect. Roy Jenkins might not be the best example I could use, but he was quoted earlier and, all credit to him, he came a long way—from a Welsh mining village, I believe. He delighted in speaking the Queen's English perfectly. Some people took the mickey out of him for so doing. We now have a Prime Minister who speaks with an accent that was never heard when he was at Fettes or at Oxford. This is a dumbing down and a denigration of perhaps what people used to look up to.

Modernising is in with the new and out with the old, change for its own sake. Consider all the fuddy-duddy old ways that the Government have been kicking. We should respect the history of this country and not apologise for it. What do we apologise for? Should we apologise for the potato famine in the 1840s or the slave trade, or any other such nonsense?

We should stand up for and support those who are in authority such as head teachers. We should show deference to the position of a head teacher or a police officer, people who are serving society. We should defer to and respect a nurse, a waitress, a road sweeper or a doctor, or even the Prime Minister, because of the positions that these people hold. We may not respect them enormously but we should acknowledge that which they are meant to be doing for us all.

The ghastly liberal left-leaning media have contributed hugely to the iconoclasm and the lack of respect that I believe has led to many of the problems that we are talking about. We need to foster a culture of respect. The Government have denigrated our institutions when they should have been standing up for them.

Deference to a position—for example, to a head teacher—is not obsequiousness. Instead, it shows mutual respect. The Government's determination to equalise and dumb down has led to a person who has, for example, got excellent A-levels or a very good degree, discovering that there is no respect from others for his or her achievement. People say, "A-levels are devalued these days", and respect for a degree is devalued as well.

We should be proud of this country, of its institutions and of its democracy. That brings me on to what was perhaps the most disturbing element of the election campaign from my point of view. I am proud of the House and this mother of parliaments, so called. However, just before the election, Judge Richard Mawrey said that postal voting in this country was worthy of a banana republic. I think that I am quoting him correctly. Indeed, the mother of parliaments was reduced to such a state. He went on to say that the postal voting system was

"an open invitation to fraud."

There are so many postal voting forms that they are thrown out like confetti. I have several in my office. I could easily have used them all. Like most Members, I am registered in two places, as is my wife. We could all use them because there is no cross-checking. I do not know whether right hon. and hon. Members realise but if Tipp-Ex is used on a postal vote—cross out one mark and put in another—that will be fine. According to electoral law, one is explaining to the returning officer that that is one's choice. If an envelope is ripped open and then resealed, that is fine. There is nothing in legislation about that, yet that is what has been happening.

There is no proper identification of postal votes. As I have said, there is no cross-checking. It is not only Members who are registered in two places. Universities and colleges have been registering all their students. Enormous numbers of students have been registered at both home and university. This is a matter of concern. There should be cross-checking.

Regrettably, most students did not vote rather than voting twice, but that is something else. In Leicester, it was reported on the Jeremy Vine show that there were 450 foreign students in one hostel—it catered for foreign students—who had all been registered for postal votes. Is no one checking this procedure? Some people were sent postal votes who had never applied for them. I know many people who found themselves in that position. Those who did want a postal vote because they were going on holiday or who lived overseas—I received many letters from people in such circumstances, and I am sure that it is the experience of other hon. Members—never received such a vote in time. I have received letters from people in Spain, telling me that they had applied for a postal vote. They live in the country for six months each year but the form never arrived. They told me that they would have voted for me, which was nice, but they could not do so.

There have been endless complaints. People went on holiday expecting to receive their postal vote more than a week in advance, but did not. I understand that postal votes, according to legislation, have to be out only on the day before the election. That is ridiculous, and it negates the purpose of postal voting for overseas voters or people going on holiday. The system is hopeless. It should be reformed from top to bottom, and I hope that the Bill we have been promised will do so.

I am ashamed on behalf of my country of the postal voting fiasco, and the Government should be ashamed of themselves for introducing it. It has destroyed the integrity of our electoral system, as there is no trust in, or respect for, a system that was changed in the name of so-called modernisation. The change was introduced, hon. Members may recall, to increase participation. I thought then, and I still think, that it was introduced to increase participation by Labour voters, as the Government were worried that they might stay at home in future. On 5 April, the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), who was previously the Minister for Local and Regional Government but has now been reduced to serving on the Back Benches, said in the House that individual registration in Northern Ireland had reduced the number of people on the electoral roll, which was a bad thing. I am not the only person who knows that the "vote early, vote often" mantra came from Ireland. Of course registration went down, because many people were wrongly on the electoral register in Northern Ireland.

The judge in the Birmingham fraud case said that the Government were guilty

"not simply of complacency but of denial".

We must restore the integrity of the register and the voting system as a first step towards restoring trust in, and respect for, our political system. We should end postal voting on demand, and should have individual registration, as recommended by the Electoral Commission. We should have proper identity checks, perhaps at polling stations, and there should be cross-checking to discover whether people are registered in two places. We must limit postal votes, which should be sent out well in advance so that people can vote if they have registered.

Turning to service voting, on 2 February, in response to my question, the Prime Minister told me that all service voters would definitely have the opportunity to vote. When I was in Iraq at the end of January, however, a straw poll revealed that eight out of 10 soldiers were not registered. That is an unscientific poll, but a large number of service voters were not registered at all. One of them told me, "I didn't think that we were allowed to vote." The Prime Minister promised that everyone would have a form to register as a service voter before 11 March, the cut-off date for registration for an election on 5 May. Those forms never arrived. They may have arrived in some places, but I could give the details of many establishments where they did not do so.

What chance did someone in Iraq, Afghanistan or on the high seas who had registered as a service voter and received a postal vote have of returning that vote if they received it two or three days before the election? Typically, the forces' Iraq post takes 10 days in either direction, so there was not any chance of returning those votes. That, too, shames the Government, who have effectively disenfranchised the service personnel whom they have sent into dangerous parts of the world to do their bidding and serve the country.I was in the Army for 15 years, but I only recall registering once—I probably changed my details once or twice—as I had a proxy. Typically, a spouse, parent or, in my case, a brother acted as a proxy in elections. I hope that my brother always voted the right way—to a certain extent, one must trust people.

In the service voting fiasco, the Government deliberately dragged their feet. Ivor Caplin, who was a defence Minister in the last Parliament, said on 20 January that

"the situation is not nearly as bad as it seems"—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2005; Vol. 429, c. 1002.]

He was right—it was much worse. I should like the Government to instigate a proper investigation to find out how many service personnel had the opportunity to vote on the Government's shambolic policies. I have already written to Sam Younger of the Electoral Commission asking him to do so. I wish he would spend more time investigating such subjects instead of sending us lots of glossy brochures that do not say very much.

I turn briefly to another couple of points. On Northern Ireland, we heard a rather good speech from the leader of the Democratic Unionist party. The Government's well-intentioned Belfast agreement, which many of us feared was built on sand, has produced exactly the opposite result to that which the Government hoped for. It has polarised opinion, so that the Democratic Unionists, who used to be considered extremists, are now the authentic voice of the Unionist or Protestant side—whichever one wishes to call it. I have no problem with the Democratic Unionists, but I have a worry that the people who were once referred to as extremists now romp back with nine seats to the one that the official Unionists got. At the same time Sinn Fein, despite the Northern bank robbery, the McCartney murder and everything else, increased its representation by one seat.

The reason for those results goes back to the matter of respect and trust. The Unionist community voted for the Belfast agreement because the Prime Minister promised that there was no place in government for those who had not given up violence for good. That message stands on its own.

Finally, I shall deal with the single farm payment. The environment and agriculture were mentioned only briefly in the Queen's Speech. I am a farmer and I have just had to fill in the forms for the single farm payment. Sadly, no Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is present. I challenge any DEFRA Minister to fill in those forms. I meet many of my farming colleagues in my constituency and get on very well with them. They have told me that they believe the forms were introduced to drive decent old family farmers—not necessarily the best educated—out of business and get them to leave farming. Perhaps one or two other hon. Members have filled in the forms. I challenge anyone to fill them in and not to think, "My God, what is all this about?" They are so complex that all DEFRA Ministers should have to sit down and fill them in before they talk about farming.

In conclusion, when the Government came in eight years ago, they said that things could only get better. If I am honest—I see a Whip in the front row—I, like many people of Conservative persuasion throughout the country, shared a little of the optimism surrounding the brave new Government, the young Prime Minister and the dynamic nonsense. Do we now believe that Britain is a much better place? Do we feel more at ease with ourselves?

Some things are certainly better. I was ambivalent at the time, but I applaud the Chancellor's decision eight years ago to give independence to the Bank of England. Whatever we say, there are improvements in hospitals. In many cases waiting times are down, but so they damn well should be, with the amount of money that is being spent on such things. Generally, do we feel that things are that much better? I believe that there is a sense of hugely raised expectations that have been dashed. That has led to cynicism, a lack of trust in politicians and a lack of respect for politicians and for our democratic institutions like Parliament, which should hold out hope and optimism for the people of the United Kingdom. The Government are failing in that and are failing the people of the country whom we are all here to serve, when there is not enough hope for the future, as we would all wish.

9.13 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I congratulate you on your re-appointment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I congratulate the three hon. Members who have made maiden speeches today—the hon. Members for Hove

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

(Ms Barlow) and for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Evennett). I reserve most of my praise for my hon. Friend. It is great to see an old colleague coming back after eight years. What took you so long, as we say?

Education's loss will be Parliament's gain, but my hon. Friend will see some changes since he left the House in 1997. The worst change is that we now occupy the Opposition Benches. I had hoped that we would return to the Government Benches. Another change is the new hours of the House, which I do not like at all. It is good that we have gone back to sitting until 10 pm on Tuesday, but it would have been better if we had got Wednesday and Thursday back to a later time as well.

We have talked about the lack of respect and how to engage people in the democratic process, and another matter that I find problematic which my hon. Friend will notice, particularly in Committee, is how all legislation is timetabled these days. The automatic guillotine falls, and we simply do not have the opportunity to scrutinise the legislation in the way that we should. However, it is wonderful to see my hon. Friend back in his rightful place.

This is my fourth term, as it is that of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). I had a good result in the Ribble valley, although the celebrations were tempered by the death of my agent, Keith Brunskill, the next day. Keith was a tremendous supporter of mine. He supported me through my summer tours over 14 years in the Ribble valley. The Queen's Speech refers to respect, and everybody I know who knew Keith respected and admired him. He was a community man and did so much for everything that he became involved in, whether it was politics, the church or just his local community and the village cricket team. My thoughts are with Kate, Mike and Vivian. He was a tremendous man and will be a great loss to us.

I have had five private Member's Bills so far and if I am as lucky in this Parliament as I have been in the past my next one will be the letter-box Bill. Having delivered thousands of leaflets over four weeks, I want to see legislation stipulating that letter-boxes should be horizontal and in the middle of the door, with no brushes, so that the leaflets go through smoothly. *[Interruption.]* That will clearly be a popular Bill; it may be my leadership bid. Everybody else is standing so I do not see why I should not. It was a hard-fought campaign.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) referred to his maiden speech, and I remember mine in 1992. It was at half-past 1 in the morning. It was on Maastricht and it was an awful speech. I spoke mostly on what I liked about Maastricht, which were its opt-outs. This Queen's Speech refers to the European Union constitution, and I say to the Minister: let us bring on that referendum and give the British people an opportunity to vote on it, irrespective of what France does on 29 May. If it votes no, so be it, but let us give the British people a chance to vote on the European Union constitution. I have no doubts about what they will say. We had to drag the Prime Minister into having a referendum in the first place. The only reason he caved in in the end was that he wanted to save what he thought were a few seats at the European Union elections that were coming up, and I am not so sure that he was successful at that, because it was quite a dreary result for the Government. But he promised a referendum and I hope that we will have that. It would not be a bad idea if we had the date of that as quickly as is possible.

One reason why I did so well in the Ribble valley, with the Lib Dems only just clinging on to second place, was my support for BAE Systems. We have talked about manufacturing today, and the Ribble valley has all the technical and manufacturing skills required to help to make the Eurofighter. The Lib Dems were against tranche 3 of the Eurofighter, and that went badly against them. The Labour party candidate was in favour of it and he increased his vote. I want to ensure that we have the manufacturing skills required to manufacture products such as the Eurofighter jet, and that we give those skilled workers our full support, and that we have the work for them in the future. We also need to ensure that our armed forces have the defence capacity that they desperately need for the job that they will have to do in the future.

The Queen's Speech also refers to support for rural services, but we do not really know what that means. We have talked about the vagueness of the Queen's Speech and its thinness in parts—none of us had the 200-page document that all the journalists had—and I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby had to say about farming. When I was knocking on doors during the election campaign, one youngster of 18 or 19—a farmer's son who works on the farm—said to me, "Mr. Evans, will I have a job to go to?" If we want a countryside that everybody can visit and working rural villages, the primary point is to ensure a farming industry that can sustain the families that live in and around those farms. This is my worry, and given the Government's desire to support rural services, I hope that they will support farming, which props up our rural areas. But we must also ensure that this is more than just words. We must ensure the survival of our rural post offices and buses, which allow people to live in such villages and to have a full life.

A children's Bill is also mentioned in the Queen's Speech. At the tail-end of the last Parliament, I asked the Prime Minister about the tragic case of a young boy in my constituency who died in the care of a child minder. Shortly afterwards, I met the then Minister with responsibility for children, who said that the Government were going to introduce a children's Bill. Having listened to what she and the Prime Minister had to say—I believe that the Prime Minister was being sincere—I hope that the Government will look at the facts of this tragedy. If they consider this children's Bill an appropriate vehicle, I hope that they will ensure that safeguards are included in it, so that our child minders are fully trained and know what to do when accidents or emergencies happen. Training and certification also have to be better. What happened to Joshua was an absolute tragedy, and if we can learn lessons from it, we can ensure that it never happens to anyone else.

The Queen's Speech also refers to a Bill on road safety—an issue which the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (Mr. Marshall) mentioned. I enjoyed everything that he had to say on dealing with speed cameras; it was absolutely superb. The current situation is clearly over the top. There are far too many speed cameras throughout the country, and not all of them are in the

right places. He said that people are losing their licences and he is absolutely right. I do hope that we will take a more intelligent approach to speed cameras and to the points system.

We also need to spend the money raised from speed cameras—well over £100 million a year—more intelligently. We need to spend it on ensuring that the roads are made safer. There have been several tragic accidents and deaths on the A59, which runs through my constituency. A particularly tragic incident occurred between Sabden and Clitheroe, and the cost-effective answer was to stop the traffic turning right into Clitheroe along the A59. A few months after that was done, there was another accident in which somebody tragically died. What is needed there is a roundabout. No doubt that would cost more money than the cones that are currently littered along the A59, but they are not an effective road safety answer. Let us ensure that some of the money raised from motorists—money raised on the back of a road safety argument—is indeed spent on effective road safety measures. I hope that we will see a lot more such measures.

We have talked a lot about crime today, and about drugs. I asked the Prime Minister whether he thought that he made a mistake in reclassifying cannabis from class B to class C. He went on a bit, saying that the Government will have a look at this issue. If the commission that they have set up recommends returning it to class B, they will do so, but why did the commission not examine this issue in the first place? Why did it not look into the various consequences of reclassifying cannabis, taking on board the various psychiatric disorders that cannabis causes, and then make a judgment as to whether it was right to reclassify it? It is a very dangerous experiment and the Foreign Secretary has already said that the Government may have made a mistake. If so, let us be big about it, admit the mistake and reclassify cannabis as a B drug. A mistake has been made and it has sent all the wrong signals to youngsters up and down the country. The impacts of the reclassification were never taken into account.

The electoral system has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby, and I am also very concerned about postal votes. It seems that a number of people who did not ask for them received them; that some who wanted them did not receive them; and that others received more than one. We must therefore listen seriously to what the Electoral Commission has to say about the problem—*[Interruption.]* I see my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby is waving a spare ballot paper for us. We must take this matter very seriously indeed. We must ensure that the electoral system in this country is rigorous: there are ways to achieve that. Let us learn the lessons of the 2005 general election and bring forward a Bill that all political parties, not just one, will support. We need effective measures in place to ensure that people receive the voting papers that they need.

In my own constituency, more than 100 people were turned away at one of the polling stations in Fulwood simply because the clerks supervising the ballot were overwhelmed. When someone phoned through to ask for more clerks, the request was denied. A police officer then turned up—not to ensure that everyone could vote, but to quell the 100 people involved and to tell them that, sadly, it was 10 o'clock, so they could not vote. It was announced on the television that 100 people in the Ribble Valley were turned away from voting. We must learn the lessons there, too. When people turn up to vote and there is a queue, there must be a system in place whereby doors can be shut or a police officer called to prevent people from joining that queue after 10 o'clock. Anyone joining the queue before that time, however, should be able to vote. We talk so often about encouraging people to vote, yet these people were turned away, which is wrong.

Finally, I want to talk about democracy in the mother of Parliaments. The hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) mentioned that reforming the House of Lords was not the No. 1 issue on the doorstep, but spoke almost exclusively about it during the rest of his speech. I want to ensure that we have a rigorous and effective Parliament, and the Government well know that they have been returned on the basis of just 36 per cent. of the vote. The last thing we want to see in this Parliament is a Government with 36 per cent. of the vote completely nobbling the second chamber. The Government are not content just to pack it full of their own cronies to gain the upper hand in numerical terms. They were upset by what happened at the tail end of the last Parliament, when not just Conservative or Liberal Democrat peers, but Cross Benchers and Labour peers repeatedly told the Government to think again on anti-terrorism legislation. The Government said that they could not do this or that, but every time the Bill came back here, we did think again and it was revised and sent back again. We ended up with an improved Bill, which both Houses were happy with. Of course, the Government said nothing about that during the election campaign, but waited until the election was over. As I said, not happy with packing the House of Lords full of their own supporters, they now want to neuter it so that the second chamber becomes ineffective against the mighty Labour Government—elected, I remind the House, on 36 per cent. of the vote.

On the day after the election, the Prime Minister said that he was humble and would listen to what the public had to say, and we all took him on trust. We will carry on taking him on trust, but he has to ensure that his policies reflect the percentage of the votes that he secured. He may wish to introduce many measures, such as ID cards and reform of the House of Lords, but he should think again. That is what the second Chamber is for. It tells the Government to think again, and the result of the 2005 general election is telling the Prime Minister the same thing—that he must think again. I hope that that is what he will do.

9.29 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): I begin by congratulating all those hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. That is a very special moment. When I made my maiden speech, I was fortunate enough to address a full House on the rate capping Bill. How times change: the House is rarely full these days. Even so, I extend to all those making their maiden speeches my best wishes for the future.

In particular, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) on his speech today. We entered the House on the same day and shared the same office for a time. In those days, conditions for newly elected Members of Parliament

[Mr. David Amess]

were rather different. Today, they are allocated offices immediately, but I occupied a broom cupboard for my first 10 years in the House. I wish my hon. Friend well in the future. He has been missed from the House, and I am sure that he will serve his new constituents well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) spoke about the Government's mandate after the election. We can argue however we like about the numbers involved in the Government's re-election, but there is no doubt that there is an enormous disparity between the percentage of the vote that the Labour party achieved and the number of seats that it has. I hope that the leader of the Labour party will reflect on that result, and on the enthusiasm shown for the Gracious Speech.

I am delighted to have so many new colleagues on this side of the Chamber. I wish them all well, but I admit that I had not thought through all the implications. I charged into the Chamber earlier expecting to drift into my normal place on the green Benches, but now I realise that I will have to use my prayer card in future to secure my place, as the Conservative Benches are likely to be full on important occasions. If that is a nuisance, it is one that I welcome.

As a number of—Conservative Members have observed, it appears from the Gracious Speech that the Government's current buzz word is "respect". I do not know whether that is a result of the new political party that caused the Government some damage in the election, but it is galling to hear this of all Governments saying that they are going to make respect the issue for this Parliament. I have no respect for a Government who, on our very first day of meeting, think that it is okay to brief the media before hon. Members. I have no respect for a Government who took us to war on a false premise, or for one who immediately reinstate Ministers who have only just resigned. Under this Government, Ministers never resign because they have done something wrong.

Finally, I have absolutely no respect for a Government who told us that there was nothing to worry about with postal votes and that nothing improper would happen. We tried to scrutinise the legislation on postal voting before the election, and all of my colleagues tell me that they are very worried about the matter. Given that several hon. Members have only small majorities, I wonder how many challenges will be brought forward.

I have no respect for this Government. Respect has to be earned, but they have done nothing to earn respect since 1997. I see nothing in the 45 Bills proposed in the Gracious Speech that will bring back respect.

I am delighted to find, however, that I am respected by a number of my constituents. I am delighted to have been returned to the House with an increased majority. I was gratified to receive this morning from one of my constituents—I will not name him—the following letter:

"I have to write to say how very sorry I am to have said to you that all politicians are"—

I shall not use the word, but it begins with W—

"when you called looking for support prior to May 5th. It brings tears to my eyes when I think of the look on your face and you had the good grace not to reply. I don't know what came over me, as you do so much good for people.

There is no need to waste your valuable time replying to this letter. I just hope I can lay this matter to rest, in my own mind. Congratulations on your win and once again, I am so sorry.

Kind regards".

I should say that I had him down on the canvass returns as a "Don't know".

The first thing that our attention is drawn to in the Gracious Speech is the economy. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) that, no matter whom one spoke to from the business sector during the four weeks of the election campaign, the economy is very flat. I have no doubt that there will be tax increases to come. Thank goodness the Conservative Benches have the numbers that we need properly to scrutinise legislation, and I am confident that we will be able to scrutinise the tax increases and all the other matters that trouble me.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): The Prime Minister gave us an assurance that taxes would not increase. If we are to have respect, surely we can hold the Prime Minister to account. He said that taxes will not increase, rather as his manifesto said at the previous election that tuition fees would not be introduced and that the Government would legislate to prevent them. We now have tuition fees, of course, but what makes my hon. Friend think that the Prime Minister was misleading the public when he said that taxes would not increase?

Mr. Amess: I am concerned because of the track record of this rotten Government since 1997. They appear to be serial sinners, and I am not optimistic that they will deliver on their promises this time, particularly on not increasing taxes.

We are told in the Gracious Speech that there will be a "programme of reform" and that the Government will

"accelerate modernisation of the public services to promote opportunity and fairness."

Mr. Robathan: What does it mean?

Mr. Amess: That is a very good question. We will hold the Government to account on precisely what they meant by that part of the Gracious Speech.

We have also heard over and again about education, education, education and how terribly important it is. In my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), education is indeed of major concern. We do not have enough secondary school places, for instance, and my hon. Friend and I will be on the doorstep of Education Ministers to see what help can be given so that our constituents are offered real choice.

As a member of the Select Committee on Health, the national health service is a major interest of mine, and after four weeks of talking to constituents it is clear that there are huge concerns about it. My hon. Friends will remember that the Labour party suggested before the general election that the Conservative party would, if given power, privatise the national health service. I wonder whether my hon. Friends were puzzled, then, by the part of the Gracious Speech that tells us:

"Measures will be brought forward to introduce more choice and diversity in healthcare provision".

That will involve private health care. Again, the Government say one thing before an election and, the very day the new Parliament opens, they tell us that they will do something else.

The only point on which I disagreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) is that I think that we should bring back Hattie Jacques. Most of my constituents agree that matrons are needed, and I hope that traditional hygiene will be brought back to our hospitals.

Mr. Robathan: Does my hon. Friend, as a member of the Health Committee in the last Parliament, know how many NHS patients are already being treated in private hospitals? We suggested that and it is a sensible idea, but I believe it already happens in some 250,000 cases a year.

Mr. Amess: My hon. Friend is right and Conservatives have no problem with that. However, I resent bitterly the Labour suggestion before the election that a Conservative Government would mean the end of the national health service, because people would then have to pay for health care. That simply was not the case. My hon. Friends intend to hold the Government to account if they attempt to honour their promise in the Queen's Speech and tinker with the private health sector.

The Queen's Speech also promised that the Government would begin long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement. In a previous election they said that they would help senior citizens, but in their first Budget they raided pension funds of £5 billion. Now they have the gall to claim that they will begin to help senior citizens. They will have difficulty with respect from senior citizens after their previous pledges on pensions.

I do not wish to upset my hon. Friends, but I am in favour of identity cards. In the 1980s, I successfully introduced a ten-minute Bill that enabled voluntary identity cards to be introduced and I am still a great supporter of them. When someone is born, they are issued with a birth certificate, and when they die their relatives are given a death certificate. There would be enormous advantages to having identity cards, but I do not want to fall out with my hon. Friends on the issue. If we cannot agree on compulsory ID cards, I hope that they can be convinced that it would be worth while introducing a voluntary scheme.

The Queen's Speech also says that the Government will tighten the immigration and asylum system in a way that is fair, flexible and in the economic interests of the country. In Southend, there is huge injustice in asylum and immigration. Genuine asylum seekers are not allowed to remain. People who come here as immigrants and have been accepted have huge hassle getting permission for relatives to come and stay for a couple of weeks. However, people who should not be in the country, and who have papers saying that they should have been removed, are still here. The system is an absolute shambles, but I have no faith that this Government will have the nous to do something about it.

Andrew Mackinlay: I genuinely do not understand how the Conservatives propose to control immigration. What categories of people who come here now would not be allowed in by the Conservatives? We have different views about who to blame for illegal immigration, which we need to address, but the Conservative manifesto promised to control lawful immigration. Who will be excluded and how will they be selected?

Mr. Amess: If I were a clever Minister, I suppose I would say that I will write to the hon. Gentleman. The leader of my party made our policy clear during the general election; it would include a quota system, with points according to skills and there would be a much fairer system than we have at present. Furthermore, I deprecate the views that the leader of the Labour party expressed on the issue throughout the election campaign. It was right that my party had the guts and the courage to raise the issue and we were at one with the feelings of the general public about the huge injustice involved.

There is one thing in the Gracious Speech on which I certainly shall agree with the Government. It concerns the welfare of the child. I am pleased that a Bill will be introduced

"to establish a barring and vetting scheme, and other measures to provide better protection for children and vulnerable adults".

Too often on the Health Committee, we heard of cases such as that of Victoria Climbié—children suffering in terrible circumstances as a result of the failure of various organisations. I welcome legislation

"to safeguard the welfare of children in circumstances of parental separation and to improve the process of inter-country adoption".

I am concerned that the Government intend to press on with the measure on compulsory treatment of people with mental disorders. That is a difficult issue and my colleagues and I feel strongly about it.

The Government tell us that they will bring forward a measure to help reduce casualties on the road. For goodness sake! The Government made it illegal to drive a car while using a mobile phone, yet that law is not being enforced. Every day, people drive using mobile phones; they tuck the phone under their ear and do not concentrate on what they should be doing. Every day there are fatalities and accidents because people drive while using mobile phones. If the Government are serious about reducing road casualties, they should enforce that law. I asked Home Office Ministers how many extra police officers have been deployed to enforce the measure: none whatever.

Mr. McLoughlin: I am concerned about a matter that my hon. Friend has not brought up. The Queen's Speech states:

"My Government will take forward proposals to introduce an offence of corporate manslaughter."

As a member of the Health Committee in the last Parliament, does my hon. Friend think that corporate manslaughter could extend to the chief executives of hospitals where the cause of death was MRSA? Might it extend to the death of soldiers when the Secretary of State for Defence had not allowed proper equipment to be issued? Could the offence of corporate manslaughter extend to such cases? Will it be confined to the private sector or should it cover the public sector as well?

Mr. Amess: My hon. Friend makes a splendid point. If the Bill is not guillotined, we shall have great fun in

[Mr. Amess]

Committee and on Report. The points that my hon. Friend articulated mean that we shall have to consider the measure very carefully indeed.

Mr. Robathan: Despite all the 40-odd measures—thin though they may be—would not it be better if we had fewer laws, but ones that were enforced, rather than lots of garbage legislation to which nobody pays the slightest attention, so that we have had to have five asylum and immigration Acts in eight years?

Mr. Amess: My hon. Friend reminds me of what I should have said at the start of my speech: we legislate too much and the laws are simply not enforced. That is why there is an enormous feeling of injustice in this country.

I am appalled that the Government are to continue with their so-called reform of the House of Lords. They have made an absolute mess of its reform so far. I should have thought that they would have learned by now that it does not matter how many Labour people they put in the House of Lords; at the end of the day, they will do their own thing. In my view, the House of Lords worked splendidly before the Government interfered with it. Since they started interfering with it, they have got their fingers well and truly burned.

The final point that I wish to make is on foreign affairs. It is very unfortunate that there has been a less than robust plan for the transitional Government in Iraq. Much more work needs to be done in that area. The Gracious Speech ends with a paragraph containing the words,

"develop the strong partnership between Europe and the United States".

I do not know who put that paragraph in. It badly confused me. We will hold a referendum on the European constitution, but my party wants to be at the heart of Europe but not governed by Europe. Although we think that the United States of America is our greatest ally, we find the posture of the present Prime Minister, who on one day was totally enamoured of Bill Clinton and on the next totally enamoured of President Bush, somewhat confusing. My party intends to put Britain's interests first.

I look forward to the next 18 months, but I am really looking forward to it on the basis that my party has 54 new colleagues, with which we can well and truly hold this rotten Government to account.

Debate adjourned—*[Mr. Cawsey.]*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Census 2001 (Southend)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Cawsey.]*

9.52 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): I am greatly honoured to have obtained the first Adjournment debate of the new parliamentary Session, and I know that the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge) and my constituents of Southend, West are very pleased that I have had this opportunity to debate a number of issues with the Minister.

I congratulate the Minister on his well-deserved promotion. I always thought he did a splendid job when he replied to the Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and summer Adjournment debates, always conscientiously following up the different points that we had raised. I hope that if I continue to flatter him more, I will find that I get the right answers to the points that I wish to raise in this short debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East and I wanted to fight the general election campaign on national issues, but the reality was that for four weeks we fought it on local issues, and we fought it on the issue of the 20,000 people who were left off the national census. But I was shocked when, halfway through the general election campaign, the Chancellor of the Exchequer decided to make that matter a key point of the election.

On 21 April, I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman about what he said during one of his briefings:

"I understand that you have suggested today that I have committed my party to a further £14 million of spending in Southend. That is absolute nonsense. I am sure that you would not want to make a untruthful statement about what I have said and I can only assume that you have been badly briefed.

When the National Census was conducted in Southend, 20,000 people were left off it, with disastrous consequences. We have lost a huge amount of funding. I am meeting the National Office of Statistics on Monday 9th May and I will be presenting them with evidence that they have made a mistake. That matter has nothing whatsoever to do with the Conservative Party's spending plans.

I trust now that you will take action to correct the untruthful press release which you have issued apparently about myself."

I have not yet received the apology—perhaps it has been delayed in the post—but now that this will be reported in *Hansard,* I am sure that the Chancellor will wish to correct the statement that he made during the general election campaign.

The crux of the matter for the Minister is that, as a result of the national census, Southend has received funding for 20,000 fewer people than it should have. It is absolutely crazy for the Office for National Statistics to claim that the Southend's population has shrunk by 20,000 since 1990, when every other element of the Government has said exactly the opposite in parliamentary responses. In other words—I shall come to the meeting on 9 May in a minute—according to the ONS, everyone is wrong, except it. That is simply not the case, and I shall tell the Minister about the result of the funding crisis in Southend.

The borough council originally expected to increase its council tax by 9 per cent. Thus the residents of Southend would have had to endure council tax

increases in excess of 15 per cent. over two years. Obviously, that would have made things very difficult for many local residents. Given the original £5 million-worth of cuts, the council would have had to make savings of £12 million over two years. The £5 million cuts in social services have included 12 redundancies; efficiency restructuring; the withdrawal of free school transport to voluntary-aided schools, with the exception of disadvantaged children; a reduction in school uniform grants to children from disadvantaged families; the closure of the Palace theatre, community centres and a mobile library; reductions in the park ranger services and grounds maintenance; the withdrawal of all bus route subsidies; and a 3 per cent. increase in charges for Southend borough council services. Obviously, that has not been very popular with local residents, so my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East and I have done pretty well over the past four weeks to survive the sort of criticism that we have received on the doorstep as a result of the financial crisis. I certainly do not blame the Minister for that, but I simply ask him to listen to what I have got to say tonight and to give my hon. Friend and me some assistance.

The Minister's predecessor warned Southend that it could be capped, so we obviously found ourselves with an increase in council tax that would not lead to rate capping. In spite of that, I have been advised today by the treasury office in Southend that we have still had to take £800,000 from reserves and an additional £70,000 in rent income from beach huts. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) is here, so I must be careful, especially as I lived there for three years, but my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East and I believe that Southend is the finest seaside resort along the Thames estuary. Some £20,000 less has had to be paid to the Essex police authority for police community support officers, and £1.1 million less provided for the cost—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Cawsey.]*

Mr. Amess: As I was saying, £1.1 million less was provided for the costs of job evaluation.

On Valentine's day, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East, myself and many others went to No. 10 Downing street where we engaged in a peaceful demonstration and gave the Prime Minister a Valentine's card. Many organisations of different types that represent the local community were present. They included the Southend Association of Voluntary Services, the Friends of the Palace Theatre, Southend Carers Association, Growing Together, Trust Links, and Southend Youth Council to name just a few.

Not only has the result of the census devastated council services, but on 24 February the very able leader of the local authority, Councillor Howard Briggs, announced that he intended to step down in May. That was not because he was gutlessly walking away from the problem, but because his health had suffered. He just felt that, in all conscience, he could not go on and face all the difficult decisions that will have to be made in future unless the Government get the national census results changed.

I know that the Minister is fair minded, and I say to him that Southend, West—I must get the figure right, because I think I claimed the last time I raised the issue that I had a constituent who was aged 120—has the most people aged between 100 and 112 in the country. There are a huge number of senior citizens, and Southend council is now having to making awful changes in terms of the support provided to a number of them.

In 1981, 160,000 people resided in Southend and, in 1991, the census told us that the figure was then 176,000. My hon. Friend and I represent an urban area, so it is not a question of people just vanishing. It is an urban area with more people than ever living in it. There can be absolutely no dispute whatever about that, and the Government agree with me. A couple of months ago, a Home Office Minister answered a question on population growth. She said:

"In February 2005 the Home Office announced that intensive family support will be introduced in 50 TOGETHER antisocial behaviour action areas through a £1.25 million cash boost. The £1.25 million will be split equally between the 50 action areas with each area getting £25,000. The growth areas which will be covered by the scheme are: Harlow, Peterborough, Southend on Sea, Northampton and Hackney."—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2005; Vol. 432, c. 202W.]

Just two months ago, in a written reply, the Home Office said that Southend was a growth area.

We then had an argument about the number of patients who are registered with general practitioners. According to the Southend-on-Sea primary care trust, there are roughly 177,522 people registered with general practitioners in Southend. A written reply from the former Health Minister, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), confirmed that figure, but according to the national census, there are 17,000 fewer people in Southend.

Now I come to the rub, and my meeting with the national census people on Monday 9 May. I frankly tell the Minister that I was disappointed by the meeting. I shall not name individuals, but I was worried that the officials whom I met, who seemed slightly heartless, did not understand the terrible effect that the census has had on residents in Southend. It has had a devastating effect, but their response in the meeting was, "No, no, no"—everyone was wrong except them. I said to them at one stage that the only way forward would be for me to try to persuade the Government and the Minister to ask the Office for National Statistics to examine carefully the results of its census. As the meeting went on—admittedly, I was fairly robust—I was dissatisfied with their answers about how the census was conducted.

There is a huge number of immigrants and asylum seekers in Southend. When the new director of social services arrived on the scene—she has now gone—she immediately embraced the Government's helping hand to assist Kosovan refugees. However, not one Kosovan has ever gone back. They are still in Southend in large numbers, and I am advised that many asylum seekers and immigrants simply did not show up on the census. When I asked the ONS how many prosecutions it had pursued in Southend, I was told that not one person was prosecuted for non-compliance with the form. I tell the

[Mr. Amess]

Minister that that is crazy. When I asked how many staff were employed to conduct the census, I was told that officials would write back to me, but what was said did not convince me that the process was entirely rigorous. I was also not convinced about how the mid-census figures had been checked because it seemed to me that just some sort of computer analysis of the situation had been undertaken.

The Government want respect, so I hope that the Minister will ask the ONS to treat the matter seriously. It has dealt with one or two concerns raised by other hon. Members, so my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East and I now want this matter to be treated seriously. We cannot wait until 2011 and 2013. The situation must be dealt with pretty quickly. The local authority believes that the ONS has badly underestimated Southend's population in the 2001 census. The ONS has missed households in the census and the census coverage survey. There was a low response within households to the census in Southend, which means that not everyone in the household was included on the form. That was a huge mistake. Following the 2001 census, the ONS revised mid-year estimates since 1991 show a flat or declining population, whereas all the administrative data point to an increase. What the census has come up with is crazy.

The Minister knows that the conduct of the 2001 census has been subject to criticism. The census estimate of population is subject to significant statistical manipulation, whereas local administrative data and sources are not. The census and MYEs are not consistent with local administrative data, such as council tax, primary care trusts, GP registrations and planning records, which all point to a higher population and to population growth in Southend. They certainly do not indicate decline. The ONS track record on projected population estimates between the census is doubtful. Its method for estimating migration, especially international migration, is not robust. For example, according to the ONS, Southend has flows of around 7,000 internal migrations and about 1,000 international migrations, which net off to a small increase. Small errors in those figures can account for inaccurate estimates.

Even the ONS found a difference of 1,412 occupied dwellings between council tax registration and the census. That is a 2 per cent. increase. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East and I would welcome the extra funding for 1,500 people. If the Minister could at least persuade it do to something about that, it would go part of the way towards making amends for the 20,000 missing people.

The ONS estimation of Southend's population does not support long-term demographic trends, such as the ratio of babies to four-year-olds when the number of women of childbearing age has risen rather than fallen. The statistical manipulation of the census returns is undermining confidence in the result. For example, the ONS places great store on the census coverage survey conducted after the census to pick up people in households who were missed by the census. However, it seems unable to acknowledge that households and people could have been missed by both the census and the census coverage survey.

The ONS projects a population growth for Southend of 160,000 to 171,000 in 2021—some 11,300 people. That is not consistent with the Government's Thames gateway plans for 6,000 additional homes in Southend by 2021. All Departments disagree with the ONS. So how is it that everyone else is wrong bar the ONS?

I end with these thoughts on the way forward. The Government tried to find a way forward in 2004 because Southend is a low council tax authority. Excluding the Isles of Scilly, there are 46 unitary authorities and only three have a lower council tax. The council have taken the Government's threat of capping seriously. The Government expect the town to grow in line with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Thames gateway ambitions. All other Departments think that the population of Southend will increase by more than that.

I want the Minister to agree to a meeting with me, my hon. Friend and perhaps the chief executive and leader of the council to discuss these important issues calmly. I also want the Minister to talk to the ONS and ask it to carry out a population study into Southend in advance of the 2011 census. We simply cannot wait until then to put matters right.

I know that the Minister is fresh to the job, but he has listened to my concerns before, albeit in an office different from the one he now holds. I simply ask him to reflect on the fact that all Government Departments appear to disagree with the ONS, to offer a helping hand to my hon. Friend's and my constituents in Southend and to help us to get those 20,000 people back on the census so that we can receive appropriate funding.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Local Government (Mr. Phil Woolas): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess). It is traditional to congratulate hon. Members on securing Adjournment debates, but I do so genuinely. He has raised constituency issues and done so in a way that is not partisan, so it behoves me as the Minister to respond properly. I also congratulate him on his doughnut of hon. Friends who have turned up to support him; my doughnut is particularly thin this evening.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman takes my remarks in the spirit in which they are intended. He has raised a constituency matter about which he obviously feels very strongly—looking back through *Hansard*, I see that he raised it on 12 January 2004 and again on 8 March this year—and I feel an obligation to respond. The best postcard that I could send to him and his hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), whom we welcome, is one that says that of course we will have a meeting to discuss the matter and his concerns. We shall arrange that with the local authority chief executive, as the hon. Member for Southend, West suggested. He kindly gave me a long timetable, extending to the next census in 2011, so perhaps I should not make commitments so far in advance. Let me explain the policy that has led to the current situation, then I shall reply to some of the points that he has made.

The overall increase in the formula grant for 2005–06 is £2.6 billion. Every council will receive a formula grant increase at least in line with inflation; in addition, councils will receive increases in specific

grants. The total increase in grant is therefore £3.6 billion, or in percentage terms—although percentages do not always present the right picture—6.3 per cent. The background for Southend and everywhere else is that the Government have been able to give significant increases in grant.

The hon. Gentleman is arguing a constituency point based on the census. I note that he met representatives of the Office for National Statistics last Monday, 9 May. Most of us spent the days after the election sleeping, so he should be commended for his fortitude. The point I make is that the ONS is independent of the Government, and were I to intervene and direct the ONS, he would probably seek another Adjournment debate or take some other opportunity—he assiduously participates in the pre-recess Adjournment debates—to criticise the Government for compromising ONS independence. However, the hon. Gentleman is on the Opposition Benches and he reserves the right to have his cake and eat it. I reserve my right to stick to the facts of the argument.

The £3.6 billion increase builds on a sustained grant increase over the years since 1997. In real terms, the increase has been 33 per cent. in grants to local government since then, compared with the 7 per cent real-terms cut in the previous four years. That is the context of the debate. Southend has received generous grant settlements—generous is, I think, a fair word in this context—from the Government. It will receive a 4 per cent., or £5.3 million, increase in formula grant from the Government in this financial year 2005–06. This is the third year in a row that Southend has had an above inflation increase, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that that is the position.

Another point to note is that Southend also benefits from the floor system in the local government grant formula to the tune of about £3 million. In addition, it stands to receive about £26.6 million from specific grants on top of the 4 per cent. increase. The hon. Gentleman raises a constituency point using ONS statistics and the flaws that he sees in those statistics. I do not think that he can argue that the formula and the Government's policy have been anything other than generous to his council. I do not think that Southend can reconcile these facts with claims that it has been underfunded.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned some of Southend's budget decisions on service provision taken by the borough council. Those are matters for it and its electorate. It seems that Southend may be misdirecting itself in the way that it considers its total budget. I understand that it has usually been its practice to set its budget in line with a figure that is now known as formula spending share, or FSS, which replaced the earlier standard spending assessment from 2003–04.

I will clarify in the brief time available to me what FSS is, or perhaps clarify what it is not. FSS is not the Government's estimate of the funding's authority's need to provide its services. It is not the Government's view of the level of expenditure that authorities are expected to meet. It is not the Government's calculation of the level of grant that is needed by authorities. FSS is simply part of the mechanism for distributing the pot of funding available to local government. This is well understood by local government throughout the country.

The main theme of the hon. Gentleman's speech is the population estimate for Southend and his claim that it is inaccurate. When calculating formula grant allocations, the Government use the best and most up-to-date data that are available on a consistent basis throughout all authorities. For population, these are the mid-year estimates produced by the ONS. The calculation of population estimates is a matter for the ONS. Queries on their derivation and accuracy should be raised directly with it. I commend the hon. Gentleman because he has done exactly that.

Revised population estimates were published by the ONS as recently as September 2004. These followed the completion of the 2001 census, which was based on local authority population studies. Southend was one of the authorities that the ONS investigated as part of this work. After consideration of all the analysis, the ONS concluded that no adjustment should be made for Southend. The statistics were based on independent analysis by the ONS. I think that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House would criticise me if I were to deviate from that independent advice.

The hon. Gentleman argued that we should use the most up-to-date data from the 2001 census in the settlement. I sympathise with his point about ensuring that data are up to date, but we faced a dilemma in considering the use of data other than population based on the 2001 census. In proposing not to use that census data in the 2005–06 formula spending share calculations, we had to balance our desire to use the most up-to-date data against our aim of providing stability in local authority funding. Using new census data in the funding formula is not, as the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged, a simple task. The changes needed to incorporate the 2001 census data would break the formula freeze and could cause large changes to the distribution of FSS. We will look at incorporating the 2001 census data in the funding formula once that freeze has ended. That would allow us to use the census data from 2001 in the 2006–07 settlement, assuming that agreement can be reached on an appropriate way of doing so.

The hon. Gentleman cited figures for losses of grant to Southend as a result of not using the 2001 data. However, there is no way to calculate those losses. The figures that he cited today and in previous debates merely resulted from putting the 2001 census data into the existing formula. That would be technically incorrect. We must wait for the new formula options before we can see broadly what effect the 2001 census data will have. We have therefore given Southend generous grant settlements. It has benefited from the floor, but the authority has still set high council tax increases. If that proves anything, it is that Southend does not have a case for its claims that it is poorly funded. Consistently good settlements from the Government ensure that all properly run authorities can provide a high level of service without making excessive demands on the council tax payer.

I am sure that as a matter of policy the hon. Gentleman would agree with those sentiments. In conclusion, I commend him on raising the issue, as he has done in two previous debates. He kindly acknowledged my genuine attempts to answer his questions in Adjournment debates, and I undertake to look at the points that he made and to meet him to

[Mr. Phil Woolas]

discuss them. He has raised a constituency issue and I hope that his colleagues will note that Ministers do not respond in a partisan way to such issues. They will try to meet concerns, but the established fact is that there have been good grant increases, supplemented by additional grants, which have secured a steady increase in funding for the hon. Gentleman's council in Southend.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 18 May 2005

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

Stephen Hesford, *for* Wirral, West

Mark Oaten, Winchester

Owen Paterson, North Shropshire

BILLS PRESENTED

CROSSRAIL

Mr. Secretary Darling, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Margaret Beckett, Mr. Secretary Hain, Secretary Alan Johnson, Secretary Tessa Jowell and Derek Twigg, presented a Bill to make provision for a railway transport system running from Maidenhead, in the County of Berkshire, and Heathrow Airport, in the London Borough of Hillingdon, through central London to Shenfield, in the County of Essex, and Abbey Wood, in the London Borough of Greenwich; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed, pursuant to Standing Order [7 April]. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 1].

CONSUMER CREDIT

Secretary Alan Johnson, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Darling, Mr. Secretary Hain, Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Bridget Prentice, presented a Bill to amend the Consumer Credit Act 1974; to extend the ombudsman scheme under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 to cover licensees under the Consumer Credit Act 1974; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 2].

Point of Order

11.36 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker—a genuine point of order. You may have been made aware that yesterday in the Chamber, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), a very serious matter was raised to which I hope you have been able to give some attention—namely, that in spite of your instructions to the contrary, the Government yesterday gave this House a flimsy four-page document summarising the merest elements of the Queen's Speech, whereas they were apparently simultaneously giving to the press 200 pages of detail that lay behind the items in the Queen's Speech.

Surely, Mr. Speaker, that is in direct contravention of your instructions, which you renewed at the beginning of this Parliament. This building is under your control; what Government Departments do is not. Surely you can now exert your influence to make sure that Members of Parliament are given the same information as members of the press.

Mr. Speaker: First, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that they are always genuine points of order; it is just that sometimes I do not agree with them.

I have noted the point that the right hon. Gentleman raised yesterday about the extensive briefing made available to the press on the legislative programme in the Queen's Speech. If there is proper information about the Government's programme available from official sources, I would expect such material to be made available to Members of this House—*[Interruption.]* It is all right; I have made the ruling and the Leader of the House has heard.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SECOND DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [17 May],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign.

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom and Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—*[Mr. Coaker.]*

Question again proposed.

Foreign Affairs and Defence

11.49 am

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Douglas Alexander): May I begin, on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, by extending his apologies to the House for his absence today? My right hon. Friend is in Washington for talks with senior members of the Administration and Congress.

May I also take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) to his new role as shadow Foreign Secretary, although I understand he may already have an application in for a more senior position in his party?

I want to speak today on the three priorities of the Government's foreign policy: first, maintaining and strengthening the United Kingdom's role as a leading European power, shaping the future of a reforming European Union; secondly, working to make the UK more secure by tackling threats such as terrorism and proliferation and acting to resolve conflict; and thirdly, our commitment to the long-term engagement required to build the conditions for a safer and fairer world.

Let me take those in turn, beginning with Europe. This Government came to power in 1997 determined to restore Britain to our rightful place as a leading power in a reforming European Union. Since then, the UK has led the push for early and wide enlargement of the European Union, which culminated in the historic accession of 10 new members last May. Two more, Romania and Bulgaria, are set to join in 2007. Under our presidency this October, the EU will launch accession negotiations with Turkey. That will be the fulfilment of a major and long-standing goal of the UK's foreign policy, and I know that it will be welcomed by all parties. We will continue to lead support for EU enlargement—a process that works greatly in the UK's interests by expanding the community of democratic and prosperous nations, opening up new opportunities for British business, and spreading reform across the whole European continent.

Moreover, under the new Commission of President Barroso, the EU has affirmed its commitment to making its economies more dynamic and flexible. Although there is still much more to do, the task of reforming the common agricultural policy has begun. The Government's firm conviction is that Britain's interest overwhelmingly lies as a strong, engaged member of the European Union. The British people have shown again at the recent election their endorsement for parties that favour such an approach and their rejection of those that want to take us out of the European Union, whether openly or by stealth, and so put the prosperity and security that we have won at risk.

The Government's approach to the negotiations on a new constitutional treaty for the European Union was consistent with our overall approach: we sought to negotiate a framework for a Europe in which the nations are strong, which works more effectively and efficiently and which can better deliver growth and reform.

In contrast, the Opposition stated on page 26 of their manifesto that they want not only a rejection of this treaty, but a renegotiation of the texts of the existing treaties. That renegotiation would require the agreement of every other of the EU's 25 member states, so I invite the shadow Foreign Secretary in his remarks today to point to one other member state that supports the Conservative party's position on renegotiation of the treaties. Even John Major, the former Prime Minister, whom the shadow Foreign Secretary served as a Foreign Office Minister, describes the policy of renegotiation as "crazy".

In truth, the Conservatives' kind of Europe is what Lord Willoughby de Broke, a former Conservative peer, described thus in a speech last June:

"like going to McDonalds and ordering a lobster thermidor."

That is, it is very nice to have but it is simply "not on the menu".

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Minister for Europe and welcome the fact that he will attend Cabinet meetings to report on the activities of this important year.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the reform agenda. Will he assure us that he will continue to pursue the Lisbon agenda, which has not been pursued in the past as vigorously as the Government would have liked?

Mr. Alexander: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's remarks. Progress on the Lisbon agenda has not been as fast as we would want. Indeed, that was reflected in the Kok report, which was published last year. Not only are the British Government determined to ensure that the pace of economic reform in Europe accelerates, but I am delighted that the new President of the European Commission shares our ambition. I am optimistic that he will continue to drive that agenda effectively in the months ahead in the European Commission.

In contrast to the Conservative party's position on Europe, the Government have delivered an effective and important agenda on the European Union constitution, which is reflected in some of the commentary that is currently available about the constitutional treaty on the other side of the channel.

David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the referendum on the European constitution will go ahead in any event? Before he answers, I remind him that I asked the Prime Minister that question last year and raised the possibility that the

Government might cancel the referendum here if another member state turned down the constitution. The Prime Minister said from the Dispatch Box:

"No, of course not. The referendum should go ahead in any event."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2004; Vol. 420, c. 164.]

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that unambiguous assurance that the referendum will go ahead in this country regardless of what happens in any other country?

Mr. Alexander: I am conscious that the right hon. Gentleman was a member of the Convention and has some expertise in these matters. Let me quote the Prime Minister, who said on 18 April 2005:

"I've always said we'll have a vote on the constitution. It doesn't matter what other countries do; we'll have a vote on the constitution."

The confidence with which we advanced the case for the constitutional treaty has been reflected in some of the commentary from the other side of the channel. The French newspaper *Le Monde* called the treaty "a British victory". The *Corriere della Sera* in Italy declared that

"the British won the day",

and Laurent Fabius, leader of the French no campaign, says that

"the British concept has won".

Indeed, those in this country who peddle the idea that the treaty is the end of Britain as we know it would do well to look across the channel where, at the moment, its opponents are arguing that the treaty is too British and too liberal—in short, too much a model of an Anglo-Saxon European Union. As the House is aware, the Government will be introducing legislation, as a matter of priority, to provide for a referendum on the treaty, and I welcome the discussions we shall have.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Surely it will be the people of this country who will decide whether the treaty is British or not, not some French politician who has an axe to grind in another place.

Mr. Alexander: I can certainly confirm that it is the Government's policy to ratify the treaty that was signed by the Prime Minister in Rome, and that as part of that process of ratification there will be a vote by the people of Britain. On that, at least, the hon. Gentleman and I have common ground.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: I have been generous to the House, but I will give way again.

Robert Key: The Minister is indeed very generous. Will he confirm that the people of Gibraltar will be able to vote in that referendum?

Mr. Alexander: Yes, the people of Gibraltar will have the opportunity to participate, which reflects the situation relating to European elections that has existed for some time now.

I welcome the discussions on the treaty that we have begun to have, in nascent form, this morning. Members will have the opportunity during these debates and discussions to expose the myths and distortions of the anti-Europeans for what they are. The case for the new treaty—based on fact, rather than myth—is the case for a modern, reforming Europe that is delivering greater prosperity and security to its members, and whose members are in the driving seat.

The treaty will give more powers to the member states, through the European Council, in which national Governments set the European Union's priorities and ensure that they are carried through. By replacing the current system of six-monthly rotating presidencies of the European Council—the body in which the European Union's member countries set the organisation's priorities—with a full-time Chair, we shall ensure that we, the nations, set the European Union's agenda and get it implemented. That is a widely supported reform, and I am pleased to say that its supporters include the leader of the Conservative party in the European Parliament.

Decision-making will be simpler, where that makes sense, but we shall retain the national veto on areas of vital national interest such as tax, social security, foreign policy, defence and key areas of criminal law, along with the European Union's budget and, of course, future changes to the treaty. For the first time, national Parliaments will have the power to send European Union legislative proposals back for review, if one third of national Parliaments believe that a draft law infringes the principle that the EU should act only where it adds value—the so-called subsidiarity principle.

Peter Luff (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Have the Government had second thoughts? Will they enable this national Parliament to express its view separately on the question of the ratification of the constitution and on the question of a referendum? Many of us would like to vote no to one and yes to the other.

Mr. Alexander: The House will be aware that during the previous Parliament we introduced a Bill that dealt with both the ratification of the treaty and the referendum. That would be our intention in terms of the Bill that we will introduce in due course. This is a treaty that sets out our kind of Europe: one of strong nations able to work effectively together to enhance their prosperity and security and add to their influence in the world. As the House is also aware, the United Kingdom will take over the presidency of the European Union for six months from 1 July. We will focus, first and foremost, on taking forward the agenda agreed with our European Union partners to ensure that the EU is equipped to deliver on the issues that matter most to the people of Britain: jobs, security and promoting peace and prosperity globally as well as at home.

We will work to enhance the security of the European Union's borders and to improve the security of EU travel documents, as part of the fight against illegal immigration and organised crime. We will also lead the EU's efforts to help to end conflict and tackle poverty in Africa, to engage countries such as China and India on climate change, to promote reform in Europe's immediate neighbourhood and to support democracy and human rights around the world.

I come now to my second theme: our work to make the United Kingdom more secure by working with our allies to tackle threats to international peace and

[Mr. Alexander]

security. The United Kingdom will continue to play a leading role in the global fight against terrorism and its networks of support. The recent detention of a leading member of al-Qaeda in Pakistan is another blow to that organisation and its aims. We will work to strengthen further the United Nations' response to terrorism, and that will include an agreed definition of such terror. I am pleased to say that last month the United Nations General Assembly reached agreement on the nuclear terrorism convention on which negotiations had been stalled for some time. In the G8, we continue to look to deliver improvements in, for instance, transport and security.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): In respect of terrorism, what exactly is the position of the United Kingdom Government on what is happening in Uzbekistan? Terrorism is undoubtedly being committed by the Government of the day. This is an example of tyranny if there ever was one, with so many people being massacred. One would hope that not just the British but, in particular, the United States Government will be consistent and do whatever can be done to ensure that the Uzbekistan Government are finished and the people there can enjoy some form of democratic rule.

Mr. Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important, grave and serious matter. I hoped to come to it later, but I shall respond to my hon. Friend directly.

This morning, the British ambassador in Tashkent travelled to the eastern part of Uzbekistan. I have not yet received a full response from him, but he travelled there with other ambassadors. We want first to be able to establish categorically what has happened. News reports that are already emerging are extremely serious. The situation has been discussed by the United States Secretary of State and the Foreign Secretary during discussions in Washington overnight, and I expect there to be further discussions with our European partners at the General Affairs and External Relations Council on Monday. Obviously, we cannot prejudge the international community's response to the facts once they are established.

Mr. Winnick: My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he accept that there is a feeling that the United States has not acted on the issue because the Government of that country are such a close ally? There is an inconsistency. Cannot a comparison be made with Kosovo, where fortunately the allies acted to stop what was happening—ethnic cleansing? Surely, more or less the same is happening in the country that I have mentioned.

Mr. Alexander: I understand my hon. Friend's point. I will simply say, having had an opportunity to see the transcript of Condoleezza Rice's comments last night, that she was clear in her condemnation of previous human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, but my responsibility and my brief are to speak on behalf of the British Government.

The British Government's position was set out in the human rights report published in 2004, in which we made categorically clear our objection to some of the human rights abuses that were taking place in Uzbekistan at that stage. We now wish to discuss with our other international partners what further action is necessary in relation to what appears to be unfolding in respect of circumstances in Uzbekistan. I can assure my hon. Friend, however, that the British Foreign Office has been absolutely consistent in ensuring that we bring to the Uzbeks' attention our concern about abuse of human rights.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: I will give way one last time.

Andrew Mackinlay: The Minister will have been briefed about my mention of the region in yesterday's debate. I pointed out that we have no embassy in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, where refugees are flooding in. Who, on behalf of the United Kingdom Government, is in Kyrgyzstan today? Are we going to open an embassy there, or are this Government and Sir Michael Jay, the head of the Foreign Office, going to persist in the absurdity of not having an embassy in that most critical part of the world, which is affected by events in Uzbekistan? When there was a velvet revolution six weeks ago, we had no British presence there.

Mr. Alexander: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. As I said, the British ambassador, David Moran, travelled to eastern Uzbekistan this morning. I understand that earlier our defence attaché had travelled to the affected areas. The first requirement—

Andrew Mackinlay: What about Kyrgyzstan?

Mr. Alexander: I will come to the point that my hon. Friend raised, if he will allow me to answer. The first requirement was to establish the facts in Uzbekistan relating to what may be an emerging problem over what may be an humanitarian crisis affecting Kyrgyzstan. As we have argued in recent days, that makes the case for ensuring that not just the British ambassador but the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gains immediate access, so that whatever support is needed on the border with Kyrgyzstan can be provided. If it would help, I will certainly take up the matter with the Foreign Secretary and write to my hon. Friend after the debate.

I turn to a more general subject: conflicts outside the area of Uzbekistan. Conflicts are a source of major human suffering and a breeding ground for terrorism, organised crime and illegal immigration. They have a direct impact on all our security.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues to generate quite appalling human suffering on both sides—

Clare Short (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Alexander: May I make a little progress? I will then give way to my right hon. Friend.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians remains a major obstacle to the stability and prosperity of the whole middle east. For Israelis, the conflict prevents a democratic nation from enjoying the benefits of peace. For Palestinians, it is a block on their aspirations for a viable, contiguous, democratic state, which is their right.

Today, the peace process is at a moment of opportunity, perhaps the best in a generation, with Israel's courageous plan for withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern west bank; a Palestinian President with a new, democratic mandate for peace; and strong, unanimous international support for a solution based on two secure, viable states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side. The Government are determined to do all we can to support the two sides' search for peace. We will continue to work closely with the United States and all those committed to making disengagement by Israel a success, and ensure that it is a first step towards implementation of the road map.

Clare Short: I think that we all agree that a just settlement on Israel-Palestine would transform the situation in the middle east and make much easier the securing of international co-operation against terrorism, but it seems that the Sharon plan to withdraw from Gaza but not open up its borders, to have a massive new settlement around east Jerusalem, and for the incorporation of Jerusalem, means that the possibility of two states on the 67 boundaries is evaporating in front of our eyes. Will the Minister give an absolute assurance that whatever the United States does, the British Government will not agree to a breach of international law and are determined that the Palestinian state should be on the 67 boundaries, including east Jerusalem?

Mr. Alexander: The Government have been forthright in their condemnation of the illegal building of settlements by the Israeli Government in recent years and we continue to regard the withdrawal plan from Gaza as a necessary step to get the road map process back on track. We continue to believe that the road map offers the best future for securing the kind of solution that I have just set out, whereby there could be a contiguous, viable, democratic Palestinian state adjacent to the Israeli state. As I say, the Government are determined to do all we can to support the two sides' search for peace. We will continue to work closely with the United States and all those committed to making that disengagement a success, and ensure that it is a step towards implementation of the road map.

Therefore, we will support the Palestinian legislative elections due to be held this summer. Meanwhile, Israel must stop the illegal expansion of settlements, as I have just made clear, which in some places could threaten the viability—as my right hon. Friend made clear—of a future Palestinian state. The Palestinians, however, also need to follow through on the commitments to reform that they made at the London meeting on 1 March, and to deliver especially on security, which is Israel's right. I can also inform the House today that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will visit Israel and the Palestinian territories soon to discuss the situation and to see how we can provide further help.

The Government will continue our strong support to the African Union peace support mission in Darfur. We have provided £14 million to the mission, largely in logistical support, and stand ready to provide further assistance as the African Union expands its force from 3,300 to about 7,700 troops. We have allocated £75 million for humanitarian assistance for Sudan this financial year, including in Darfur. The United Kingdom fully supports the talks mediated by the African Union in Abuja aimed at finding a political solution to the crisis. We are pressing all sides to work with the International Criminal Court to bring those responsible for committing atrocities to justice.

The Government will also continue to maintain pressure on the Government of Zimbabwe, working with international partners until there are positive and substantive commitments to pursuing a restoration of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

We welcome the ongoing progress on détente between India and Pakistan and will continue to support that dialogue as they seek to make progress on the issue of Kashmir.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Given that rape as a weapon of war, compulsory relocation, forced labour, the use of child soldiers, the use of human mine sweepers, and the bestial destruction of villages all testify daily to the vicious character of the military dictatorship in Burma, and that simultaneously Total oil is propping up that vicious regime with a $400 million investment in the country, what does the right hon. Gentleman, on behalf of the British Government, intend to do in concert with others in the EU and the UN to bring about a culture in which it is recognised that sanctions are required to bring that regime to book and to give the people of Burma the opportunity to enjoy the peace, freedom and justice that we have long enjoyed and they have too long been denied?

Mr. Alexander: I pay tribute to the long-standing commitment that the hon. Gentleman has shown to bringing an end to the suffering of the people of Burma. I noticed with some regret that the word "Burma" never appeared in the foreign policy section of the Conservative manifesto, so clearly his concern is not as widely shared on the Opposition Benches as I believe it is on the Labour Benches.

On the substantive point that the hon. Gentleman raised, first I would like to point out that I have met Association of South East Asian Nations ambassadors in recent months and urged them to take further action in relation to the difficulties being encountered in Burma. It is with some regret, however, that I must tell the House that the fact that we have been unable to make further progress is not the result of a lack of will on the part of the United Kingdom but, I fear, a reticence on the part of many Asian neighbours of Burma. In the European Union, Britain has undoubtedly been at the forefront of efforts to bring pressure to bear on the Burmese regime, and I hope and believe that that will continue to be our policy as we review ways of taking forward our steps against the Burma regime in the months ahead.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South) (Con): The Minister will be aware that he took this country to war

[Richard Ottaway]

against a dictatorship that turned out not to have weapons of mass destruction. The definition of weapons of mass destruction includes chemical weapons. He will also be aware that in February of this year, Burma, on the Burmese-Thai border, used chemical weapons against Karen rebels. So we have a situation where the Government took the country to war against a country that did not have weapons of mass destruction, but choose to ignore a country that has weapons of mass destruction and has used them. Will he share his thinking and his logic on that?

Mr. Alexander: It is simply wrong to suggest that this Government are ignoring the challenge of Burma. This Government have led the international effort in the European Union to ensure that tougher and more rigorous sanctions are brought forward. However, we do need to work with European Union partners, not least given the relative balance of investment between EU partners in Burma and that within the United Kingdom. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to make every effort to continue the pressure on the Burmese regime—certainly, on this side of the House, that has been a long-standing commitment.

Since 1997 this Government have done more than any other to make the United Kingdom's rules on arms exports among the very best in the world, yet much more needs to be done to regulate the trade in conventional arms worldwide and to tackle the easy availability of conventional weapons, especially small arms, in countries vulnerable to conflict and instability. The Government will therefore lead international work to agree a global arms trade treaty. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will take forward this work at a meeting of G8 Foreign Ministers that he will be chairing this coming month.

The United Kingdom's commitment to the people of Afghanistan and Iraq remains strong as they work to defeat the men of violence and to build their democratic future.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's suggestion of a worldwide convention on the arms trade and arms dealing. Will he turn his attention to the non-proliferation treaty talks that are going on in New York at present? Can he give the House an assurance that the British Government will adhere to the original terms of the treaty, which is for global nuclear disarmament, and that this will be included in a British proposal for the conclusion of this year's conference?

Mr. Alexander: We have met all our obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and we are engaged in important discussions at the moment. I can assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to take forward our initiatives to secure wider disarmament in relation to the treaty of which he speaks, and which is under discussion in New York.

The United Kingdom's commitment to the people of Afghanistan and Iraq remains strong as they work to defeat those who would put in jeopardy the progress that has been made. As the House is aware, UK forces serving in Iraq are a part of the multinational force and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House would join me today in paying tribute to their courage, professionalism and commitment. The United Kingdom's forces are mandated under United Nations resolution 1546. That mandate will be reviewed by the United Nations Security Council next month and will expire on completion of the political process—that is, when Iraqis have agreed the constitution by referendum and held elections due by December 2005.

However, the multinational force is in Iraq with the agreement of the Iraqi Government, who may terminate their presence at any time or request their continued presence. The UK therefore will continue to provide troops for as long as the Iraqi Government want us to remain. We have no desire to stay a moment longer than necessary, but we will not leave the job before it is done. We will continue to help Iraq to develop more capable security forces—

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: Not this time; I have been generous in giving way.

We shall continue to help Iraq to develop more capable security forces of its own, working with our partners in the multinational force, NATO and the European Union to train and equip the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police service, and we shall continue to support Iraq's reconstruction, to which we have already committed £544 million. However, to build the conditions for wider global security and prosperity we cannot just focus on the middle east. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said, we must in particular make this a year of opportunity for Africa. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will chair the G8 summit in Gleneagles in July, from which we hope to achieve significant results in delivering the recommendations of the Commission for Africa, as well as building consensus for action on climate change.

Derek Conway (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Minister has been generous to the House in giving way. While he is talking about the wider impact of the British Government's relations and representations, will he bear in mind the fact that the longest-serving prisoners of war in the world today are soldiers of the Moroccan army held by the Algerians? That is also an aspect of interest to British-Arab policy. Will he consider whether representations could be made to the Algerian Government to release those long-standing prisoners?

Mr. Alexander: I will certainly be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman in relation to the point that he raises.

As G8 and EU President, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will also attend the UN millennium review summit in New York this September. As well as being a forum for stronger action on development and especially on Africa, the summit provides an excellent opportunity to strengthen the UN and make it more effective. We strongly welcome UN Secretary-General Annan's "In Larger Freedom" report, which sets out innovative ideas for reform within a framework, rightly

linking the challenges of development, security and human rights. We will work with other Governments, the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly to encourage member states to sign up to as full a package of reforms as possible at the summit in September.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of the second world war—perhaps the proudest moment in our national history—yet for some time the year 1945 also symbolised the end of an era for the United Kingdom's power and influence in the world. Now, 60 years on, the United Kingdom is Europe's strongest large economy, and Britain is strong today not just because of our economy or our alliances: we are strong, too, because we are confident of the role that we can play in the world. We are proud of our strong values and our network of global friendships and influence. When we tackle poverty and hunger, act to resolve conflicts or work for the spread of peaceful, democratic institutions, we are promoting both our values and our own security and well-being, along with those of the world as a whole. Today, with this Government, Britain is a nation determined to be at the heart of international efforts to build a safer, fairer and more prosperous world.

12.7 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I begin by saying how delighted I am to be back at the Dispatch Box again after my 18 months exile with those at central office—although probably not as delighted as they are. I am disappointed that the Foreign Secretary is not here for this debate. He had the courtesy to call me personally to explain why, for which I am grateful. Notwithstanding that, the date of the Queen's Speech has been known for some time, and I hope that the Government will ensure that their business is better organised and more coherent in future.

This is indeed a good time for us to review our foreign policy in general. Ours is the world's fourth largest economy, with a unique trading pattern and long and varied historical contacts. Yet, despite what the Minister has just said, the ambitions set for our country have been far too modest, the focus of policy has been too narrow, and there has been too much tactical thinking and not enough strategic vision. We need to look for new opportunities and challenges. Our long-term prosperity depends on finding new markets and new trading partners.

We need to ditch the hang-ups of those who seem obsessed with apologising for our history, and turn the good will and respect for this country, which stills exists extensively around the world, into new economic opportunities. We need to look ever more outwards and remember that the world does not end at the southern border of Greece, the western border of Portugal or the eastern border of Poland and the Baltic states.

The charge that we lay against the Government is that they are insufficiently ambitious for the United Kingdom. Too much foreign policy is about grandstanding, rather than the national interest. There is far too much short-term tactical consideration, and they have failed to exploit the many opportunities that they have been given. They have failed to understand that British foreign policy is about doing what is in Britain's national interest. They seem to confuse policy and diplomacy. It is for Ministers to set out policy in the national interest and for the diplomatic service to carry out that policy diplomatically.

Let me give the House just one example that indicates the problem. The European Union has been very keen to lift the arms embargo on China, largely to accommodate the wishes of the French and German defence industries. That policy has been strongly opposed by the United States, which has indicated its unwillingness to see new defence technology shared with the United Kingdom if it will subsequently be simply exported to China. There is no strategic interest for the United Kingdom in arming Chinese defence forces, but there is clearly a downside in terms of defence co-operation with the United States. Yet the policy has been decided not on the basis of our national interest, but on the short-term tactical interest of the Prime Minister at the beginning of the EU presidency. The obsession with regaining popularity among European leaders seems to take precedence over any other considerations. As long as it is good for him, it does not matter if it is bad for British industry and British jobs.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is talking absolute nonsense. Is it not a fact that even before the European Union's decision to lift the ban on exports to China was agreed or came into being, the United States had dragged its heels for the past three years over the international traffic in arms regulations waiver on the transfer of technology? To link the two is absolute nonsense.

Dr. Fox: But the ban has not been lifted. The Government have changed their position on more than one occasion. They were initially against the lifting of the ban, but they then suddenly became in favour of its lifting. It is the lack of consistency that we complain about, and that lack of consistency is based on short-term expediency, not the long-term national interest.

In the coming months, the relationship with Europe will be centre stage. We need to have a realistic and balanced assessment of our relationship with the European Union and of the relationship between the EU and the rest of the world. Much good has come initially from the creation of the European Community, then the EU. We have moved from a century when much of the world's conflict originated on the European continent to a new century in which a stable family of democracies has been able to welcome those from the oppressed states of the former eastern Europe. The EU has helped with the seamless transition to democracy of Spain, Greece and Portugal and the reunification of Germany. The progress of the single market, albeit at much too slow a pace, has been a step in the right direction.

The biggest problem with the EU, however, is that it has a Eurocentric view of the world that is a generation out of date. While the EU gazes at its navel and slowly ossifies, China, south Asia and the Americas continue to take an increased share of the world's market, eroding what would have been European wealth and power. The citizens of Europe have been betrayed by those who have failed or refused to see what is happening beyond the borders of Europe itself. It is a failure compounded by the overtaxing, over-regulating and uncompetitive nature of the social democratic policies followed by too

[Dr. Fox]

many European Governments. It is not a coincidence that many more jobs have been created in the United States than in the EU, or that the United States has actually been increasing its share of world trade. Social democratic policies are making Europe less competitive in an ever-more competitive global economic environment. There is no Marshall plan now, no post-war growth spurt to hide the uncompetitive nature of the interventionist doctrine. In a world of ever-more fiercely competitive markets, it is sink or swim—and the waters are rising around Europe.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I guess we get the hon. Gentleman's drift that he is not very much in favour of the European Union. A few years ago, he was, as I understand it, vice-president of the campaign against a federal Europe, which declared quite openly that it was in favour of a separate relationship for Britain with the EU and, if that was not possible, withdrawal from the EU. Does he still hold the views that he held then?

Dr. Fox: We are all allowed to have some progress in our views. For example:

"The EEC has pushed up prices especially for food . . . Above all, the EEC takes away Britain's freedom to follow the sort of economic policies we need. These are just two of the reasons for coming out."

That was the Prime Minister during the Beaconsfield by-election in 1982.

We made it very clear at this election that we want to have a different relationship with the EU—a more flexible relationship—but to remain within the EU. That was extremely clear during the general election. We have to have a different relationship with a different EU because, over-burdened by parasitic bureaucracy, hard-working people across the EU are overtaxed, businesses struggle to compete and the cost of failure is paid for by the young unemployed of France and Germany and by the diminished potential of the next generation. The real problem of the EU is not that described by the little Englanders—that Europe is too foreign—but that it is not foreign enough. The EU needs to be more outward looking and flexible, and should end its absurd obsession with uniformity, which causes unnecessary friction and time wasting.

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the United Kingdom should have an associate membership status with the European Union?

Dr. Fox: No, we should play our full role in developing a more flexible European Union that would be in Britain's best interests.

All this is important because in the coming months, no doubt in great detail, we will have to decide whether we want to sign up to the next chapter of European integration. We will debate the issues in the Bill that the Government bring forward—I am sorry that there will not be two Bills, rather than one. The German Minister for Europe, Hans Martin Bury, has said:

"the EU constitution is the birth certificate of the United States of Europe . . . the constitution is not the endpoint of integration, but the framework for as it says in the preamble, 'an ever closer union'."

That is far from the tidying-up exercise described by the Government.

The new constitution would undermine individual member states' ability to determine their own policies in key areas such as the economy, law and order, and asylum and immigration. The European Union would gain most of the trappings of statehood, with its own president, Foreign Minister and legal system. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) has said:

"countries have constitutions: nation states make treaties with one another."

The Government's whole handling of the European constitution is typical of how they do business in Europe. First, they say that nothing damaging to Britain is being proposed. When that is proposed, they say that they will block it. Then when they give in, they say that it is a good thing for Britain after all.

A former Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), is in the Chamber. He claimed that the charter of fundamental rights would be as legally binding as the *Beano*. However, in the constitution the charter will have full legal status and will be enforced through the European Court of Justice.

Another former Minister for Europe, the right hon. Member for Neath (Peter Hain), claimed that the negotiations on the constitution were a "triumph for Britain". The truth is that the Government simply abandoned many of their objections and accepted proposals that they had previously condemned. During negotiations, the right hon. Gentleman tabled 275 different amendments. Only 27 were included in the final draft, yet the objections covered many important areas.

The Government called for the new EU power to

"ensure coordination of the employment policies of member states"

to be deleted, but they were ignored. They said that they did not want an EU Foreign Minister. The right hon. Member for Neath said that that was "unacceptable", but the Government were ignored. They opposed making the charter of fundamental rights legally binding, but in the end, as ever, they gave way. Originally, the Government were against the very idea of a constitution. In 2000, the Prime Minister said that there should not be

"a single legally binding document called a constitution".

However, in the end he gave way to those other member states that wanted one—how typical.

On 12 May 1997, the new Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Livingston (Robin Cook), launched his mission statement. He said:

"the Labour government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business . . . our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves. The Labour government will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy".

To that I say just one word: Zimbabwe.

On Africa, the many speeches and endless photo opportunities of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have generated far more heat than light. In his speech to launch the report of the Commission for Africa on

11 March, the Prime Minister managed not to mention Zimbabwe at all, yet it is surely the greatest stain on all of Africa's fragile democratic record.

For all his talk, the Prime Minister has achieved little. When robust action was required, he looked the other way. Robert Mugabe has destroyed the rule of law, contravened human rights in the most appalling way and destroyed his country's prosperity with casual indifference, yet this British Government have stood idly by. They have bottled out of confronting President Mbeki on his tacit support for Robert Mugabe. Zimbabwe depends on South African energy supplies, yet the Government seem afraid to demand action from President Mbeki.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is talking nonsense. Britain led the way in getting European sanctions against Zimbabwe and in raising the problem in the United Nations, as his Front-Bench colleagues asked us to do. Can he tell us why, during the Conservatives' term of office, the Government gave Robert Mugabe a knighthood?

Dr. Fox: An absolutely devastating point. It is typical of the Government that they take no responsibility for what has happened in the past eight years. While they have been in charge of British foreign policy, we have seen the destruction of Zimbabwe's economy and the abuse of human rights. Far from instituting sanctions that matter, they have, instead, been utterly worthless. Nothing effective at all has been done against the regime in Zimbabwe because this Government have not had the nerve to do it.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development requires the President of South Africa to promote democracy in southern Africa, and he should have been reminded of that. The consequences of inactivity have been not only continued suffering in Zimbabwe, but tacit encouragement to other southern African countries to consider land occupations similar to those that had such damaging consequences in Zimbabwe.

Clare Short: I agree that the situation in Zimbabwe is devastating, with a lack of free elections, the suppression of human rights—torture and starvation—and the destruction of the economy. The question is: what can we do about it? It is right to be angry, but the Government have done what they can, which is not much. What more could be done to put right a dreadful situation?

Dr. Fox: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for making a sensible point, but the Government have not put the pressure on South Africa that they could have exerted, which would have been important in improving the situation in Zimbabwe. For some reason, they bottle out of any confrontation with the South African Government, who largely hold the key to the situation in Zimbabwe. I urge the Government, even at this late stage, to make a far greater attempt to persuade the South African Government of the important role they have to play. The new high commissioner will soon go to South Africa. Surely that is an opportunity for the Government to exercise influence on the South African Government to improve the situation.

That problem and others in Africa have not been helped by consigning the Commonwealth to the periphery of British foreign policy.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to look carefully at arms sales to some African countries? Is he comfortable with the appointment of the noble Lord Drayson as Minister with responsibility for defence procurement? He gave large amounts of money to the Labour party, got plum contracts for his company, got a peerage and has now bought a job in government. What signal does that send?

Dr. Fox: I share my hon. Friend's reservations. That appointment was typical of the Prime Minister, who, in a spirit of contrition, stood at the steps of Downing street and told us how much he had learned, and then immediately started reappointing cronies to top Government posts. That was the extent of the humility that we will see in the Government's third term.

It is a great shame that the Commonwealth has been consigned to the periphery of our foreign policy. It is one of the most valuable resources for exerting our influence, yet the Government regard it with disdain. I sometimes think that Britain does not deserve the Commonwealth. The French or the Germans would give their right hands to be at the centre of an organisation with such political and economic potential. So much could be done, but so little is attempted by the Government. Whether it is limited vision, lack of ambition or some sort of post-colonial guilt syndrome, it is impossible to say, but it is certainly a wasted opportunity. From India, with its massive potential for growth, or Sri Lanka, where I had the honour to play a small part in the peace process, to the powerhouse that is Australia, so much could be achieved, yet so little is attempted.

The one area in which the Government have been only too ready to become engaged is Iraq. I do not intend to go over whether or not the Attorney-General gave inconsistent advice on the legality of the war. Nor do I intend to rehearse the familiar arguments about whether the country was misled about Iraq's ultimately non-existent weapons of mass destruction. But what is clear is this: if Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein's regime was certainly intent on getting them. Iraq was in clear breach of its international obligations. The security of neighbouring nations and the stability of the region as a whole was put at risk by those developments.

I make those points not because of their relevance to Iraq, but because of their relevance to Iran. Just what are the parallels between Iraq and Iran? There is widespread public anxiety that the decision to undertake military action in Iraq was taken long before we in the House of Commons voted for it. So what is the Government's plan of action for Iran? The approach of the three European Governments, however well meant, does not seem to be reaping rewards. If the Security Council comes next, what sanctions do we envisage and in what time scale? Transparency on the issue from the outset is vital if we are to maintain public confidence. Trust will be harder to come by second time around.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it would be helpful in persuading Iran not to develop nuclear weapons if the non-proliferation treaty conference re-adhered to the 2000 declaration and

[Jeremy Corbyn]

Britain and the United States in particular said that they would not develop a new generation of nuclear weapons?

Dr. Fox: I think that members of all parties in the House would agree that it would be beneficial—full stop—if Iran did not develop the potential for nuclear weapons. We would certainly support any Government efforts to that end. We want a transparent course of action that is set out well in advance by the Government.

Much is talked today about globalisation. One of the benevolent consequences of globalisation is that it is more difficult for Governments to misrule their peoples and mismanage their resources without quickly running into problems. Globalisation may not make bad government more difficult, but it certainly makes it more apparent. International interdependence brings opportunities as well as challenges. Interdependence based on free trade increases political stability and makes military conflict less likely. Governments require stability to ensure that their economic interests are not interrupted, and having vested interests in other countries reinforces the likelihood of effective international defence co-operation.

Free trade offers opportunities for exporters to take advantage of new markets as they emerge. Michigan university estimates that if only a third of all tariffs on agriculture, manufacturing and services were cut, world trade would rise by more than $600 billion—equivalent to an economy the size of Canada's. Free trade offers the best opportunity for third-world countries to provide themselves with a sustainable income, and it is infinitely preferable to long-term dependence on aid.

Although no one can deny the vital role that aid plays in the short term, it is too often little more than "conscience money" paid out by developed economies that are preventing less developed countries from gaining access to their markets. We have all seen examples of that over recent years. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short) made much of that in her time in office. Aid has become synonymous with caring about poverty, but on the ground it is all too often a process of taking money from poor people in rich countries and giving it to rich people in poor countries.

We in this country have one of the best—if not the best—programmes of bilateral aid in the world. We need greater control over the aid budget. The work of the British Council and non-governmental organisations shows just how effective our programmes can be when they are managed on the ground by those who understand local conditions. Those of us who have seen their work at first hand have marvelled at their skill and efficiency. What a contrast that is to the expensive and bureaucratic operations run by so many multilateral organisations.

This country has much to offer in Europe and beyond. We will support the Government where they do the right things. We will particularly support their efforts to deal with global warming and the effects of climate change; that affects all the world and its future generations. In the United Kingdom, the compassion of our citizens, the expertise of many of our organisations, our economic and political standing, and our historical perspective and diplomatic experience give us natural advantages in pursuing a positive, outward-looking and optimistic foreign policy. All that holds us back is our Government's lack of ambition. We need a foreign policy that is run for the long-term interests of the United Kingdom, not for the short-term tactical interests of this Labour Government. It is a sad state of affairs, but it will not always be so.

12.29 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I assume that it was you, Mr. Speaker, who arranged for international affairs to be the first subject for discussion under the Queen's Speech. I thank you for doing that, because it is important that the subject be given the priority it deserves. The general election campaign from which we have just emerged is the first I can remember in which international affairs have played a significant part throughout. Every day dozens of people in my constituency raised the subject of Iraq with me, as well as global poverty and all that goes with it. Such a degree of understanding is most welcome.

To some extent, the Government's approach to international affairs has been contradictory. On the one hand, we have seen almost slavish support for George Bush and his neo-con foreign policy, which led us into the disastrous war in Iraq; on the other hand, we have seen the highly effective work of the Department for International Development to increase our aid budget and promote sustainable development and economies, the Government's support for the Kyoto treaty process, and the historic debt write-off proposals made by the Chancellor in various forums during the past few years. I hope that in this Parliament the Government will spend much more time, energy and effort on the latter aspects of foreign policy, rather than continue to be seen around the world as stooges for George Bush and his policies.

What is now happening in Iraq is a consequence of the invasion and occupation. I hope that the Government recognise that the longer we stay in Iraq with no endgame, no date for withdrawal and no proposal for withdrawal by the United States, the more the presence of United States and British forces will become, not the solution, but a greater part of the problems that that country faces. We need transparency. We need to know how many Iraqi people have died as a result of the invasion, what the effects have been of the use of cluster bombs and depleted uranium, and what proposals there are for withdrawal from Iraq. I do not support or condone in any way the murderous attacks against civilians, but we have to recognise that, beyond that, there is a large popular civil movement throughout Iraq that is also calling for the withdrawal of British and American forces. We must acknowledge the fact that there is substantial unity across the piece in Iraq on the need for the withdrawal of those forces.

Clare Short: Does my hon. Friend agree that the legitimacy of the present Government of Iraq is undermined by the lack of Sunni representation? The Association of Muslim Scholars has said that it would encourage Sunnis to join the Government in the event of

an agreement by the occupying powers to withdraw. Changing our policy in that way could lead to a much more stable Iraq.

Jeremy Corbyn: That is a fair point. The Government of Iraq are not seen to be representative of the entire population. They exist within the green zone in its strongest form; in the rest of the country, their writ is patchy. Perhaps the most effective forms of government in Iraq are to be found in the Kurdish regions in the north of the country, and I suspect that, in the foreseeable future, there will be serious and legitimate demands for total autonomy, if not outright independence, for those regions.

Iraq dominated the last Parliament and it will dominate the present one and international affairs until such time as we recognise the necessity of setting a date for withdrawal by British and United States forces.

Mr. Winnick: Although my hon. Friend and I differed sharply over the war, I too do not want British troops—or American troops—to remain in Iraq indefinitely. I acknowledge his comment a few moments ago, but does he agree that there must be the strongest possible condemnation of the way in which hundreds of Iraqis are murdered every week, not by the coalition forces, but by suicide bombers and terrorists? The victims are, first and foremost, women and children, but many active trade unionists have also been killed.

Jeremy Corbyn: Obviously, we all condemn the attacks that are going on and the terrible tragedy of the loss of life of entirely innocent civilians who are merely trying to make a living and survive in a difficult set of circumstances.

We must consider the effects of the invasion and also the forces that have been unleashed by that invasion that are causing the problem within Iraq. If we go into illegal wars—I believe that this was an illegal war—occupy indefinitely and support a Government who are in part privatising and exporting the country's wealth, an opposition is created that is uncontrollable and the mayhem that we have seen is the result. There are some hard and serious lessons to be learned. It is an issue that dominated the minds of many people during the general election campaign, who only voted for the Labour party reluctantly. They were strongly opposed to the policies that the Government pursued on Iraq. It is a lesson that must be understood, learned and acted upon by the Government during this Parliament.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that Iraq was the foreign policy issue that was most frequently raised with Labour candidates on the doorstep? Does he also agree that the danger of an indefinite deployment of our troops in Iraq is that they will move from being seen as an army of liberation to being seen as an army of occupation? There is nothing in the history of the 20th century that suggests that the indefinite occupation by western troops of a third world country is politically sustainable.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend makes a valuable and correct point. The longer the troops stay when they are unwelcome, the harder it is for them to go, the more brutal is the departure and the more humiliating is the endgame. When the United States finally had to leave Vietnam in 1976, we all have memories of US helicopters evacuating people from the roof of the US embassy in Saigon. I plead with the Government to think carefully about the situation in Iraq and to give us some proposals and plans for the withdrawal of British and US forces from that country. They should think also of the longer term consequences within the region of the illegal nature of the war.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman ask the Government also to commit themselves to establishing exactly how many civilian deaths there have been in Iraq? Once that figure is established and accepted by the Government, the argument will be moved on.

Jeremy Corbyn: I made that point earlier. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. There must be some independent verification of the number of civilians who have died during the invasion, since the invasion and as a result of the current unrest in Iraq. We need to know the full scale of horror.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) called Iraq a third world country. Yes, it is now, but it was not always thus. There was a period when Iraq had one of the highest standards of living within the region, with the best standards of health care and education. Those standards were certainly far better than anything in any neighbouring country. Sadly, that has all been destroyed.

The neo-con proposals appear to be to continue with heavy threats against Iran and possibly to move against Syria in future. I hope that there is no such plan to engage in further military adventures in the region. Instead, apart from withdrawal from Iraq, we should turn our attention to a solution to the problem in Palestine. When talking to anyone anywhere in the middle east, it is clear that the running sore throughout the political class is the issue of Palestine.

In January I had the good fortune to be in Palestine. I was in Gaza, as an observer during the presidential elections. There was relative calm on polling day by Gaza standards. There was some shooting by occupying forces in Rafiah and other places. Ordinary, decent people, wanting to survive, to live and to get their kids in school—all that sort of thing—said that living in Gaza is living in an open prison. Having spoken to people from the mental health foundation in Gaza, they legitimately told me that they thought that almost two thirds of the population had some degree of mental health problems because of the occupation and the stress that goes with it. The stress of occupation and poverty—unemployment runs at 70 to 80 per cent.—leads people to do crazy and extreme things. I condemn suicide bombing in any form, as it is ludicrous, wrong and abhorrent in every way, but we must consider the circumstances that breed such anger and outrage. We should listen to the voices of the peace movement in Israel and Palestine, and say firmly and bluntly to the Israeli Government that withdrawal from Gaza is not enough. There must also be withdrawal from the west bank, an end to the settlement policy and recognition of the role of east Jerusalem in a future Palestinian state. If we move in that direction, many other things become

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possible in both the region and the wider world. We must take that step and be prepared to put tough pressure on Israel to achieve withdrawal.

I could speak about many other issues, but I am conscious that many other Members wish to speak, so I shall refer briefly to only two other broad areas. During the election, the "Make Poverty History" day became a welcome feature of campaigning. The issue is crucial—we cannot continue to live in a world where a quarter of the population lives on the brink of starvation and call it a world of peace and justice. Interestingly, there was consensus among most of the political parties about the need to eliminate poverty globally. That is a credit to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short), the former Secretary of State for International Development, and others who have done much to educate people about the realities of world poverty and what needs to be done to tackle it.

It is not enough to say that we will wear wrist bands or go to Trafalgar square to support the "Make Poverty History" programme unless we are prepared to do something about the issue. I welcome the document produced by the Commission for Africa, as it includes a welcome section on the colonial history of Africa, its impoverishment and the deskilling effects on the continent. Anyone who has visited the poorest African countries will accept that none of the millennium targets will be met, given the current rate of progress. In Angola, the majority of children barely receive any education at all. Those who do receive education are taught in classes of 70 or 80 in ramshackle buildings with no facilities whatsoever. The notion that we will conquer illiteracy within the time frame of the millennium goals is simply unrealistic. Many other problems including health care and associated areas must be addressed. AIDS is a huge issue, but it is not the only one affecting people's health throughout Africa.

The debt write-off proposals are very welcome, but we must also consider the issue of African trade and development. If the Government are serious about adhering to the commission's proposals, they must adopt a tough attitude towards the United States and the European Union at the next round of World Trade Organisation talks; otherwise we will continue with a policy that protects the richest farmers in the richest countries, impoverishes the poorest people in the poorest countries and prevents Africa as a producer continent from processing its own products.

Ms Abbott: Does my hon. Friend agree that while we welcome and support the personal commitment by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to fighting poverty in Africa and the poorest countries, that campaign should not be conducted at the expense of middle income countries that are our traditional allies and friends? In particular, unless the push towards free markets and liberalisation and the removal of protection from traditional Caribbean agricultural products such as sugar and bananas are carefully managed, countries such as Jamaica and the Leeward and Windward islands will be plunged into poverty. If agricultural labourers are displaced from the traditional crops of sugar and bananas, they will diversify not into computer programming, but into the drugs trade and criminality. We must give careful thought to the process of liberalisation so that we do not make poor people poorer.

Jeremy Corbyn: As my hon. Friend knows, I too am a member of the all-party Caribbean group, and the best years of my life were spent in Jamaica, so I hope that I have some understanding of the problems that are faced by economies that developed around sugar and bananas and other fruit for export to Europe through the colonial system. If we remove that avenue for sale, as we are doing at present, impoverishment will follow, followed by the drugs trade and criminal elements. Tourism cannot solve all problems within the Caribbean; there has to be an indigenous agricultural system there, and we should be supportive of that.

John Bercow: I agree very much with what the hon. Gentleman said about the emerging consensus on trade policy; I focused extensively on it in my election literature. As trade distorting subsidies to western agricultural production are the knowing, deliberate and calculated policies of the richest Governments on earth to make the richest people on earth richer and to exacerbate the plight of the poor, how does the hon. Gentleman think, in practical terms in a multilateral context, it will be possible to get agreement in the EU and with the United States at the World Trade Organisation to get rid of those subsidies, given that we will have to take on powerful political lobbies who want to do nothing of the kind?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am astonished and welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I agree that we will have to take on very powerful lobbies, and in the United States the federal Government's heavy subsidising of powerful interests to dump food on Africa and other parts of the world, but particularly on Africa, amounts to an investment by the US in the wealthiest to impoverish the very poorest in Africa. That is the effect of it, and likewise the dumping of genetically modified crops.

The last WTO round collapsed, essentially because of a degree of unity that developed between Brazil, India and China, which led the poorest countries in the world, and that was a good thing, because had a deal been reached on the agenda that had been put down, it would have been very damaging to the poorest people around the globe. If we want to conquer poverty, we must make changes, and that means ending this subsidy of food dumping by Europe and the United States, supporting and promoting industrial development and job creation in the poorest countries in the world, and allowing a degree of protection of agricultural industries to continue in Africa, the Caribbean and other places so that they can develop themselves and eliminate their own poverty. It is not a simple process, but it requires a clear commitment by us. Therefore, if we go to the WTO linking arms with the worst elements of the EU and the United States, we will only set our faces against the poorest in the poorest countries of the world. If we are serious about conquering poverty, we must be prepared to pay the price for it as well. I hope that the Government are prepared to do that.

I am conscious that I have gone on rather a long time, but I have taken a lot of interventions, and I have one final area to mention.

Ms Abbott: More.

Jeremy Corbyn: My parliamentary neighbour is very kind, but I will have to deny her the pleasure of listening to me for very much longer.

I want to conclude with a point that I made during an intervention on the Minister, and that is the issue of the non-proliferation treaty review conference that is going on in New York at present. That was a landmark treaty achieved during the cold war in which we talked clearly about the long-term proposal for the five declared nuclear weapon states to disarm. It has to be welcome; it has to be a good thing. That was its long-term objective. Because of the existence of that treaty, it has been possible to say firmly to other countries that were thinking of developing nuclear weapons that they should not do so. It has had considerable effect. There are some estimates that as many as 25 countries would have developed nuclear weapons by now had it not been for that treaty. But to achieve success requires a clear statement by the Government. I welcome the fact that the Queen's Speech said nothing about developing a new generation of nuclear weapons. I wish that it had said that there would be no new generation of nuclear weapons, but at least by not saying the opposite it gives that possibility.

I have received reports about the NPT conference—I must declare that I am a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and that I have been a member of CND for as long as I have been a member of the Labour party, which is since the age of 16—and I shall quote from the comprehensive overview of the situation released by the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed el-Baradei:

"as long as some countries place strategic reliance on nuclear weapons as a deterrent, other countries will emulate them",

and

"we cannot delude ourselves into thinking otherwise".

We would do well to recognise Mohamed el-Baradei's wise words.

I have received a report about the unfortunate news from New York:

"The US has refused to accept the inclusion of any reference to both the 1995 and 2000 NPT Review Conference. This means reneging on a significant step made at the 2000 Conference when the UK and the four other declared nuclear weapons states gave an 'unequivocal undertaking to work toward the total elimination of their nuclear weapons' and the 13-point practical step agreement to achieve that goal".

When the BBC's "Newsnight" programme interviewed the Prime Minister, I was disturbed to hear him say that we must retain our nuclear deterrent and that we have had an independent nuclear deterrent for a long time. I question the use of the word, "independent", in respect of the British nuclear deterrent, but we clearly possess nuclear weapons. We should strongly support the NPT process and recognise that Trident must not be replaced by a new generation of nuclear weapons. As Trident ceases to be operational, we should stop living with nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons have not brought peace to the world, because they take up a lot of resources and present the danger of proliferation.

The Government's approach to Iran, which involves a troika talking to the Iranian regime, is welcome and helpful, and I hope that it continues. If we transmit positive signals through our participation in the NPT review conference, it will help to bring about the possibility of wider nuclear disarmament, which we all want to achieve. Many tens of thousands died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the only use of nuclear weapons in wartime. Surely we can take a step forward on the 60th anniversary of those events by saying that we will get rid of nuclear weapons world wide and by setting the example of getting rid of ours.

This debate comes at a very important time. We live in a world in which serious wars, which are currently occurring in Iraq, Colombia and the Congo, are a danger. Wars occur because of competition for resources, poverty, nationalism and other reasons. We cannot say that we live in a world of peace, when, as I have said, so many people live in desperate poverty. We live in one of the richest countries in the world, and surely it is up to us to do all that we can to eliminate poverty around the world, to promote peace through disarmament and to recognise the need for justice. We should bequeath those changes to future generations, rather than bringing up a new generation on a diet of weapons of mass destruction, war and conflict.

12.53 pm

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): These occasions inevitably assume some of the characteristics of a tour d'horizon, but since we all have our own pairs of binoculars, we sometimes see the horizon in different ways. That is why I apologise to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) for not following him in focusing on the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and on international development, which he discussed with telling force and commitment. I have no doubt that we shall have opportunities to return to those topics on other occasions.

The hon. Member for Islington, North struck a chord when he said that our foreign policy would play out against the backdrop of Iraq, which is inevitable so long as 8,000 British forces are still deployed there. In the course of the general election, at least one tragic event showed that those 8,000 forces are at daily risk of their lives, and, although we have deep divisions of principle and of view about Iraq itself and how Iraq should be managed, all hon. Members unstintingly admire their professionalism and commitment.

Events during the general election campaign made it clear beyond any question that the objective from the start was to support the United States in achieving regime change in Iraq. The alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction, about which little or no evidence existed, and the existence of which has now been disproved, and the breach of United Nations resolutions, which was determined solely by the allies—the Attorney-General himself made it clear in his published opinion that he did not support that approach—provided a cloak of legality for an act that was plainly in violation of international law.

I do not shrink from saying that in supporting regime change, the Government adopted an approach to foreign policy in which the ends sought were used to

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justify the means. Indeed, that is the justification to which the Prime Minister immediately resorts when he is asked about those matters. The doctrine—if it can be described as such—that the end justifies the means is very dangerous in international affairs, and it has been used throughout history to justify oppressive practices that have later been the subject of outright condemnation.

In his comprehensive introduction to those issues, the Minister for Europe implied that human rights, peace, security and the control of weapons proliferation rest on an adherence to international rules and standards, which is a point that the hon. Member for Islington, North underlined. How can the United Kingdom insist on respect for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty by Iran, or respect for human rights in China, if we appear to have abandoned the very rule of law on which those calls are based?

On the lifting of the European Union arms embargo against China, I will not rehearse all the arguments, but I will say this: it is wrong on human rights grounds, political grounds, strategic grounds and industrial grounds. I hope that Her Majesty's Government will not support it.

I shall turn to the current situation in Iraq, because we are constantly enjoined to consider not how we got there, but what happens now. The situation is clearly far from what was predicted. The UN development programme has carried out the most detailed survey of living conditions in Iraq since the invasion, and its report, which was published last week, refers to major social and economic problems such as 18 per cent. unemployment. Among the thousands who were surveyed, more than eight out of 10 households suffer power shortages, only half have clean water and only one third are connected to a sewage network.

The report identifies a significant deterioration in standards of health care and education. Doctors, nurses, medical equipment and medicines are in short supply, and a staggering 23 per cent. of children suffer from chronic malnutrition. Schools lack adequate resources and levels of youth illiteracy are high. Household incomes have plummeted, and it has been estimated that as many as six in 10 people in Iraq now live on food handouts. That is a long way short of the promised brave new world.

Tragically, the security situation has deteriorated to the point at which the ordinary tasks of life are both difficult and dangerous for many Iraqis. The head of the American forces in Iraq reports that coalition and Iraqi forces are subject to more than 50 attacks a day. Since the formation of the new Government, more than 500 killings have occurred. It is a measure of how commonplace such killings have become that even in the broadsheet newspapers that opposed military action, one must read pages five, six or seven to find the details of what has occurred. The fear instilled under Saddam Hussein's systematic repression has been replaced by the fear of indiscriminate attacks.

This is all because—here I recognise the point that the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), whom I welcome to his new responsibilities, made in advance of the war and has made since—there was a wholly inexcusable failure to plan for the stabilisation and reconstruction of post-war Iraq. The complete abandonment of Iraqi security forces and the determined de-Ba'athification of Iraqi institutions was of itself profoundly destabilising. That situation has not been helped by heavy-handed military operations on the part of the United States, particularly in Sunni areas. Abu Ghraib, which is once again in the news today, is a constant reminder of unacceptable behaviour with deeply damaging consequences not only in Iraq but throughout the whole middle east region.

It is necessary to recognise that the open-ended presence of 150,000 foreign troops in Iraq fuels the insurgency. The common enemy of the insurgents, who are composed of Islamist jihadists and nationalist extremists, has become the coalition and the Iraqi security forces with whom they work. The solution has indeed become part of the problem. That is why it should be the policy of Her Majesty's Government to state as their objective a phased withdrawal by the end of December 2005, at the date of the expiry of the United Nations mandate. I believe that the withdrawal of British forces in such circumstances is entirely justified, subject to three areas in which more effort is required: the Government in Iraq should be seen to be a sovereign Government and less of a creature of the coalition; the services to which I referred should be restored in order to give the people of Iraq some semblance of normal standards of living; and security should be improved through a far higher degree of training and equipment for Iraqi forces.

Patrick Mercer: I am listening to the right hon. and learned Gentleman with great interest. Like every other analyst of this situation, he will appreciate that if it is to improve, there must be greater security. If the Iraqi forces are to be trained to take up that role, it is necessary for coalition troops and police to be there in the medium if not the long term. How can we withdraw when those tasks still need to be completed?

Sir Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman, who has some knowledge of military strategy, knows that an exit strategy is defined as being either the moment at which one knows that one has done one's task, or the moment at which one knows that one cannot complete it. My anxiety is that we have an open-ended commitment whereby we will stay for as long as we are required. Just how long will that be? What consequences does it have for overstretch in our armed forces and for our political influence in an area in which that influence has been deeply damaged?

There will be a point at which we have to leave Iraq, but there will never be a good time to do so. The right approach is to have an objective. At the moment, the Government do not have an objective. I imagine that somewhere in the depths of the Ministry of Defence, with which the hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) is no doubt familiar, people are planning for how long British forces will be there—for two, three, or four years. That is not a commitment that we have any obligation to maintain. We had a moral obligation created for us by the Government in taking military action—a moral obligation that none of us could shrink

from—but we have fulfilled that, and we have a moral obligation to our own forces and to the interests of the people of the United Kingdom.

Clare Short: There was an option for securing the future of Iraq after the conflict—an international leadership under an international mandate that would have brought in lots of different forces seeing themselves as serving the people of Iraq rather than the coalition. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that that option is still available, because the new UN resolution after December could internationalise the leadership and the reconstruction, and then the occupying powers could leave and the people of Iraq could have the chance of a better future?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I wish that the right hon. Lady were right about that. Her intention is perfectly correct. However, we fared very poorly in the efforts that were made to persuade Muslim countries to provide supporting forces in Iraq, even after UN Security Council resolution 1546, which gives warrant and authority for the continuing presence of the coalition, and expires at the end of this year. I wish that it were possible to created a multinational force of the kind that the right hon. Lady describes, but I have very great doubts about that.

Clare Short: A number of the Muslim countries that were approached made it clear that they would be willing to serve as part of a UN-mandated force, but not in support of the coalition. That was the position of Pakistan and of other countries.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I ask the right hon. Lady to consider this from her intimate knowledge of government and of our relationship with the United States: are there circumstances in which we could have envisaged the United States ceding authority to a force of the kind that she describes? I doubt that very much. Her intention is right, but the chances of achieving it are not as great as she or I would prefer.

That takes me on to Iran. The European Union and the United States have legitimate anxieties about Iran's use of its civil nuclear programme to conceal a nuclear weapons programme. At the heart of that is Iran's entitlement under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty to enrich uranium for civilian purposes. However, as everyone knows, once technologies have been mastered for that purpose it is a short step to achieving the technical capability for the production of a nuclear weapon. In truth, given Iran's record of concealment and lack of co-operation with Dr. el-Baradei's organisation, the E3, as it has been described in shorthand, is certainly right to seek the permanent cessation of enrichment and reprocessing activities. We must now embrace concerted efforts to persuade Iran to uphold its suspension commitments under last year's Paris agreement, with the ultimate object of persuading it to agree to end all enrichment activities and to accept full International Atomic Energy Agency inspections. It is necessary to consider other methods, and the credible prospect of economic sanctions combined with incentives on trade and technical matters, together with the offer of security assurances, could be helpful in enabling us to reach such an agreement.

A source of profound concern, however, is the active consideration by some in Washington of a military alternative—and, indeed, the possibility that Israel might act as some kind of surrogate of the United States. The Foreign Secretary has been unequivocal. He said in December that military action against Iran was "inconceivable". The Prime Minister, when asked to comment, said, rather more delphically, that "there are no plans". I believe that the House would want the Government to state again, unequivocally, their position on the use of force against Iran, because the risks of military action are enormous. A military strike could provoke retaliation throughout the whole of the middle east, with Israel being a direct target. Circumstances in Iraq could deteriorate if Iran thought that it was in its interests to try to stir up trouble for the coalition in order to divert attention from itself. It would most certainly strengthen the position of hard-line conservative factions in Iran at the expense of the reformists and undermine the prospect of change.

Furthermore, an attack is far from certain to achieve its military objectives, given that Iran's nuclear facilities are well hidden and well dispersed. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that any attack could prove counter-productive, leading to Iranian withdrawal from the NPT and strengthening domestic support, born out of a sense of national identity, for the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

In that context, the issue of Israel and the Palestinians was mentioned in a trenchant intervention by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short).On many occasions in recent years we have heard from the Dispatch Box condemnations of the expansion of settlements on the west bank and of steps taken that would make it impossible for Jerusalem to be available as a capital for both communities. But what is ever done in support of those condemnations? What steps does anyone ever take? If one suggests, as I did 18 months or two years ago, that we might review the European Union's preferential arrangements for Israel, one brings a forest of condemnation and criticism down on one's head. Can we envisage any circumstances in which we would be so condemnatory of breaches of international law by any other democracy, but then stand back as the breaches continue and find ourselves incapable of taking action in support of our condemnation? On that analysis, Israel enjoys a privileged position indeed.

Mr. Winnick: In 1948, as a young person, I, like many others, took the view that the creation of Israel was justified. I have not changed my view. However, is it not clear that the Sharon Government and those to the right of Sharon have not the slightest intention of bringing about a Palestinian state? As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) pointed out, the continued post-1967 occupation means misery and humiliation for the Palestinian people. It is the responsibility of the United States, far more than that of Britain, to do what it can to force Israel to recognise that it is breaking international law and inflicting such harm on the Palestinian people.

Sir Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman and I took different positions on Iraq, but I am happy to say that on this topic we are of one mind.

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The United Nations has been mentioned. The Minister for Europe referred to a 60th anniversary in his opening speech. Of course, this year marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nations. Recent events have brought that institution's authority under threat but also provided an opportunity, with the publication of the report of the high-level panel.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the Atlantic charter was the blueprint for the United Nations. Three things formed the basis of that charter: the dignity of the human individual, the banishment of war as an instrument of foreign policy, and a new programme of economic liberalisation to promote development and alleviate poverty. The principles remain the same today, but it is perhaps a pity that we have not been better at implementing them. The principles are the same as those that we are discussing here.

No state acting on its own can address the challenges of poverty, disease, conflict and terrorism. That is echoed in the authoritative report of the high-level panel. Its common thread is respect for international law and the necessity for multinational action. Against the background of Iraq, the panel sends out a clear and strong signal that the existing rules governing the use of force are adequate and need to be respected.

The Secretary-General has responded by putting forward his proposals, which echo to some extent those of the panel, and emphasise that the goals of security, development and human rights are interdependent and can be fulfilled only by sustained co-operation. I hope that the British Government will make that cause fundamental in their approach to foreign affairs in this Parliament.

The Security Council should reflect today's world, not the balance of power in the aftermath of the second world war. The principle that should be embraced at all stages is that the world needs co-operation, which means collective action, rules and respect for those rules.

John Bercow: We agree that the United Nations should be an instrument of necessary change and not a symbol of passive acceptance of a frankly unsatisfactory status quo. In that context, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that, for all the good work of the high-level panel, its position on the UN Commission on Human Rights was not impressive, given that it argued for automatic membership of the commission? Does he agree that the Secretary-General's position is better? Membership should be determined not by geography or automaticity but by behaviour.

Sir Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is right. The Secretary-General, provoked or stimulated by the panel, produced what seems to me a much more elegant solution than that originally envisaged by the panel.

Darfur has implications for the United Nations. The Minister for Europe made a strong case for what has happened, but he did not persuade me and I doubt whether he persuaded himself. The international community's response to the crisis in Darfur has been slow and inadequate. None of us can be other than shamed by what we have done or not done about Darfur. According to the United Nations, 2 million people have fled their homes and at least 180,000 are thought to have died. People in Darfur are still unsafe and suffering shortages of food, water and medicine. That will be remedied only by strong and concerted peace enforcement action—I use those words advisedly—in Darfur, with full United Nations backing.

The world has watched as Governments have prevaricated and the killing has continued. The Security Council should secure the presence of an African Union-led force of at least 10,000 troops and police as the UN's humanitarian chief has requested, with full logistical and financial backing and air support. The force should have a clearer and stronger mandate to protect civilians, not just themselves. There should be targeted sanctions against the Sudanese Government, including a comprehensive arms embargo. A strict no-fly zone should be imposed over Darfur. United Nations monitors should be deployed, including human rights observers, and all the atrocities should be referred to the International Criminal Court. Effective action is imperative, to protect not only the civilians in Darfur but the fragile north-south peace process.

The violence in Uzbekistan is a matter of grave concern. However, it is hardly surprising, given its Government's long-standing record of systematic human rights abuses. For the moment at least, the former ambassador, Mr. Murray, must feel vindicated.

The United States has a military base in Uzbekistan. It signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2002 and has provided more than $200 million in aid. There are reports that the United States and the United Kingdom receive information from the Uzbekistan Government that may have been obtained by torture. What do our Government say to those allegations?

Why, in the past five years, have our Government approved arms export licences to Uzbekistan for categories including

"military, security and paramilitary goods and arms"?

Exactly what sort of equipment has been exported? If we are serious about arms exports, we should also be serious about their transparency.

Did those exports conform to criterion 2 of the "Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria", which the Foreign Office publishes? It provides that licences should not be issued when there is a

"clear risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression".

What the devil is taking place in Uzbekistan now if it is not internal repression?

Concerted pressure must be placed on the Uzbekistan Government to respect the universal right of peaceful protest and freedom of expression. Western states, including Britain, must defend and promote human rights and democracy everywhere in the world. There should be no selectivity. Oppressive regimes should not be exempt from censure simply because of political expediency. The campaign to spread freedom and human rights can never succeed unless the same rules apply equally to all.

I was interested to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on Europe. He expressed his view a little more noisily than his predecessor but it is not much different. I thought that I

detected a stirring in Rushcliffe; I thought that there might be a moment when Rushcliffe would be unable to resist the bait to put the sensible case on Europe, which used to be a characteristic of the Conservative party but has long since disappeared—

Chris Bryant: He is not rising to it now.

Sir Menzies Campbell: No, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is not rising now. [HON. MEMBERS: "He will be."] I shall make a special effort to be present throughout his speech.

With referendums taking place in Holland and France, our Government can no longer procrastinate on the issue of Europe. The no campaign was launched today; it is time that the yes campaign was launched, and only the Government can do that. If we are serious about the European Union, we must make the case for the peace, prosperity, stability and democracy that it has brought to Europe. Everyone knows that economic prosperity in Britain is underpinned by our membership of the world's largest internal market—a market that constitutes one fifth of global gross domestic product. I have no hesitation in saying that the treaty for a European constitution is essential to facilitate the operation of a much enlarged European Union, and that the spread of freedom, human rights, economic liberalism and good governance to the countries of the former Soviet Union is an historic achievement of which we should be proud, and which we should never stop highlighting.

We shall return to the issue of Europe when the Government introduce the Bill to ratify the treaty, and a lot of the old arguments will be rehearsed. I hope that the Bill will pass quickly through the House of Commons and that we will have a referendum as soon as is practical, to allow Britain to be at the heart of Europe and of the reform of Europe. However, the Government should be in no doubt that the referendum will be a test of commitment and nerve.

The United Kingdom can achieve a better foreign policy. We can commit ourselves unreservedly to the rule of law in international affairs. We can use our influence in Europe and in other places with which we have historic ties, including the Commonwealth, to promote democracy and respect for human rights. We can commit ourselves to support in word and deed the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. We can forge a new relationship with the United States that would be a partnership of influence, without our being so subordinate as to make us appear subservient. The Government have all to play for, and the House is entitled to expect them to take every opportunity to advance those principles, and the interests of the people of the United Kingdom.

1.21 pm

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): I should like to begin my first speech in the House with an apology to my hon. Friends. As the new Member for Leicester, South, I can claim credit for being the Labour gain on 5 May. I was also, however, the candidate who did not win the by-election last July. My thanks are therefore due to my many hon. Friends who campaigned for me last year, and my apology goes to them for being 10 months late in getting here.

My constituency has many strengths. It contains most of Leicester's city centre, which has a lively, thriving shopping centre and a unique covered market. Leicester has an unbroken history from Roman times: it was a major Roman centre, its Norman castle hall is still partly standing, and it has a beautiful mediaeval guildhall. It is a fine city that experienced dramatic growth during the 19th century, and we still benefit from that legacy today. The city contains two excellent universities—Leicester university and De Montfort university—which contribute enormously to its well-being, its cultural life and, particularly, its economic life.

The constituency of Leicester, South is possibly unique in having four first-class professional sports teams: Leicestershire cricket club; Leicester City football club; the Leicester Riders basketball club; and the Leicester Tigers rugby club. While Leicester City football club might not currently be in its proper place in the premiership, we can console ourselves with the triumphs, or indeed the near-triumphs, of the Tigers. We can also look forward to a good summer for the county cricket club.

I firmly believe, however, that the outstanding strength of my constituency is the diversity of its communities. Every aspect of Leicester's life has benefited from the families who have made their home there over recent decades. Its social life, its cultural life, its religious diversity, its political life, its business and its economy have all been enriched and transformed by those who have made it their home over those decades. We can never be complacent, but Leicester provides a model of a community strengthened by and proud of its diversity.

I am privileged to have led the city council in Leicester for more than 17 years, and I am now privileged to have been entrusted by the electors of Leicester, South to represent them in this House. It is appropriate, in this debate on foreign affairs and defence, to refer back to the by-election last July. Other parties focused at the time on the single issue of Iraq, and were quite successful in converting anger over that issue into votes. At the general election it was different. That is not to say, however, that the many members of the electorate who believed Iraq to be a mistake—indeed, who were appalled at the blunder that it represented—have changed their view. They have not, and neither have I.

However, in Leicester, South and elsewhere, the election was about the Government's achievements and manifesto, and the alternatives to those achievements and that manifesto. The electors in Leicester, South are aware that the constituency has benefited enormously from three highly successful Sure Start schemes, which have transformed the life chances of many children. They are also aware of the extra police and community support officers who contribute so much to community safety in the city. They are also aware that antisocial behaviour legislation has enabled communities to begin to reclaim their neighbourhoods for the ordinary, decent people who live in them.

The electors of Leicester, South are also aware of the transformation of the city's public services that is taking place under Labour. They are aware of the £700 million commitment to transform Leicester's hospitals, particularly the Leicester royal infirmary, which is in my constituency. The new children's accident and

[Sir Peter Soulsby]

emergency unit there has already been built and opened, and it is paving the way for the major transformation of that and the other city hospitals.

I must, however, mention two issues of concern that were brought to my attention during the election campaign. The first was a specific concern expressed by the parents of children in one part of the constituency about the potential effect of the proposed city academy on the other schools in the neighbourhood. Although most people did not express opposition to the academy, they frequently expressed concern about the perceived lack of genuine consultation and dialogue about the proposals, and about the potential impact of the academy on the other schools currently attended by their children.

The other, more general, concern that I must mention came from Muslim constituents. They are respectable, reasonable, sensible people who, in recent times, have felt that their religion has been grossly misrepresented and that their communities have been demonised. Although they warmly welcome the proposals to outlaw religious discrimination, they none the less increasingly resent the way in which they, their families and their friends have been stopped, questioned and subjected to official attention for no apparent reason other than the way in which they were dressed or the fact that the men had beards. They share the concern of many other constituents in Leicester, South that the introduction of further anti-terrorist legislation and the proposed introduction of identity cards should take place only in ways that will protect their civil liberties and their dignity.

I want to use this opportunity to commit myself to playing a full part in the regeneration of Leicester. I particularly want to ensure that the very welcome moves, following the Lyons report, to relocate Government Departments and agencies do not miss the excellent advantages that Leicester provides in terms of location and communications. For too long, unaccountably, Leicester has lost out to the smaller city of Nottingham somewhere to the north—a city which I understand is somewhere near Rushcliffe. I hope, along with my good right hon. and hon. Friends the Members for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) and for Leicester, West (Patricia Hewitt), to help to ensure that the balance is redressed for Leicester and that we too have our share of Departments.

I want to pay my respects to Parmjit Singh Gill, my immediate predecessor, who was here for a brief 10 months. Although we taunted him about it, it is indeed fortunate that Mr. Gill remained a member of Leicester city council. He will, at least until the next city council elections, have an opportunity to use in that forum the experience that he undoubtedly gained in the House, and I wish him well.

I began with an apology, and I shall end with an aspiration. I was proud to be, for more than 30 years, a friend and sometime agent of Jim Marshall. Jim, of course, represented Leicester, South until his sudden death almost exactly 12 months ago. With a break in the mid-1980s, he had served the constituency since 1974. He was a man of principle, much loved, much admired and now sadly missed by his constituents in Leicester, South and, I know, by many Members here. My aspiration is to be as effective a representative of Leicester, South in the future as was my friend Jim Marshall in the past.

1.31 pm

Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I begin by welcoming the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby), and congratulating him on his excellent maiden speech. He has taken a rather tortuous path to get here and his arrival has been a little delayed, but I am sure that we welcome him to our midst. I certainly look forward to his joining in the politics of the east midlands, a region of which I too am one of the representatives.

The hon. Gentleman made a passing reference to my home city of Nottingham. There is a little rivalry between the two cities. Three Nottinghamshire Members were listening to the hon. Gentleman—the right hon. Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon), the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) and me. It would be quite easy to reply to him, because the inhabitants of Nottingham sometimes regard Leicester as a slightly duller city than ours, and personally I thought it was smaller. In a serious forum of this kind, however, it should be said that it is a very fine city.

The hon. Gentleman has played a prominent part in the politics of his city for many years. We welcome his transition to the national stage and the effective way in which he made his maiden speech, and look forward to his taking part in our deliberations from now on.

I expect I will not be the only Back-Bench speaker who, like the hon. Gentleman, does not confine himself to the subject of foreign affairs and defence, because the debate gives us an opportunity to consider the Queen's Speech as a whole—although I can reassure the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) that I shall not resist the temptation to touch on one or two aspects of foreign affairs that will concern us over the next 18 months. I shall begin by reflecting on the rather curious background to this particular Queen's Speech, the first of the new Parliament after the recent election. I think that it was presented by a significantly weakened Government and a much weakened Prime Minister. It was really the valedictory address to the nation's politics of a Prime Minister who we all know will depart from his great office some time in the not too distant future.

It is odd that that should be so, because in fighting the election the Prime Minister won a third successive victory, which is historic for his party, and he has returned here with a political majority that many earlier Prime Ministers would have envied. I think, however, that he has done so against a background and in circumstances that have diminished his authority, and should bring home to him that the time will soon come for him to end a very long period of premiership of which, in my opinion, he has so far not made very effective or valuable use.

I agree with the hon. Member for Leicester, South that Iraq did not dominate the recent election as it dominated his by-election, but I believe that the strange result that we saw was due more to Iraq than to anything else. Iraq itself did not feature greatly in my conversations with my constituents and others, and I do not think that the public became too immersed in the

minutiae of the legal opinions given by the Attorney-General. I think they reinforced the impression that the public already had of the way in which the war had been embarked on. I also think, however, that the repercussions of the Iraq war for the reputation of the Prime Minister and the reputation of the Government's handling of events had a marked effect on the way in which people voted.

It seemed to me that the apparent national campaign did not interest the public greatly, and no strong theme emerged from it. The public are always bored and occasionally repelled by national campaigns, and I think that this campaign matched up to any I can recall on both fronts. Most of those among whom I campaigned would agree. However, the unpopularity of the Prime Minister, and the loss of any reputation he had had for trustworthiness and inspiring leadership, were very marked. The effect, in a very complicated scene across the country, was a significant shift of votes from the Labour party to the Liberal Democrats; and the electoral system ensured that my party obtained more seats than the Liberal Democrats as a result of that shift, giving us the majority that we now have.

I believe that the Prime Minister's reputation has been irretrievably damaged. As we saw yesterday, he is still a charismatic campaigner, but he is a campaigner who no longer comes across as a young Lochinvar leading his country to some distant destination. The techniques are there, but the trust is gone. It is not a question of whether he will hand over to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but a question of when he will do so, and that may well coincide with the end of this first parliamentary Session.

The Prime Minister's reaction in the presentation of the Queen's Speech is rather curious. Like all Prime Ministers approaching the end, he is plainly anxious to make his peace with destiny and try to ensure that history marks down whatever achievements he can accrue to his name in the 10 years or so for which he will have held office. He has therefore presented us with 45 Bills. He is clearly trying to resume the campaign of radical reform of public services on which he wanted to fight the election but was dissuaded by his Chancellor. He sent back to Darlington the person who was meant to be the messenger for the campaign. Now he has returned to the issue on which he wanted to fight the election, with a radical and crowded manifesto.

It is rather ironic that the Prime Minister should do that. It is ironic that he should wish to bow out with reforms that seem to me to have been taken largely from the third term of the Thatcher Government. Those are the ideas to which he has returned, and which he now wishes to pursue. It is ironic because of the contrast with the situation when he arrived here in 1997. It seems to me, when I look at the Labour Government's history, that in 1997 they had all the power that any democratically elected Government of this country could ever have had if they wanted to change the country. This really was an elected dictatorship, with a huge majority, a very troubled Opposition and the world at their feet—with a public whose expectations of them had been raised to amazing levels.

It seems to me, looking back, that the Prime Minister and his Government did practically nothing with that, certainly in the first four years. They were elected against the background of a lot of waffle about the third way, but very few practical proposals for doing anything. They mainly dedicated themselves to gaining a second election victory while they thought of something to do on the domestic front. Here we are, eight years later, and the power is gone, or diminished. The Prime Minister is experiencing his last days, and is trying to set about a whirlwind process of reform which I doubt he will achieve without considerable difficulty.

The leader of my party has said that where that reform coincides with the social reform started by the third term of the Thatcher Government we will quite properly support the Prime Minister, and I welcome that. I do not think this is a time when we should be too opportunistic, in the first 18 months of a Government. I shall not discuss the health reforms at length because this is a foreign affairs debate, but I admire the Government's efforts to develop the internal market, and their involvement of the private sector to give patients more diversity of provision and wider choice—on a scale that we could not have dared to attempt ourselves when we were being denounced for thinking such thoughts and embarking on health reform 10 years ago.

I see that the hon. Member for Leicester, South has doubts about the city academies. The city academies are merely the city technology colleges under another name. They are based, I think, on the same legislation. I remember—he is consistent—how fantastically hostile the Labour Government were. The very successful Djanogly college in Nottingham was faced with such hostility that they would not provide lolly-pop ladies for the school crossings, let alone allow the pupils to play football against any of the other schools in the city. It is now one of the most successful schools in Nottingham. I hope that the city academies achieve great success as the campaign is brought forward, and my party should support that.

Great things have to be done on pensions. It is astonishing that the Government fought the election on a platform where they had no policy whatever on pensions. They were waiting for Mr. Adair Turner to inform them of what it might be. In 2002, they were going to adjust public sector pensions, but they backed down immediately when faced with the threat of industrial action from the trade unions. The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that we should look forward to no great reform in this Parliament. I hope that we will have great reform in the first Session of the Parliament, and I hope that my party will be constructive and help us to take some of the difficult decisions that have to be taken. However, where we support the Government, I hope that we will also—this will be the main point of my speech at the end—insist that reform be done properly and scrutinized. The problem, as the Labour party has piled into some of the things that we would always support ourselves, is that reform under this Government so far has constantly been undertaken in a breathless, ill thought out way, dominated by one initiative after another, led usually by press releases, sometimes by statements to the House, which then get forgotten and overtaken six months later.

Reform has been over-centralised, over-directed and based on too many targets, some of them with perverse effects. There has been too much statistic chasing to try to persuade a doubtful public that results have been

[Kenneth Clarke]

achieved. If the Prime Minister is a man in a hurry, realising he is reaching the end of his term of office, it becomes all the more important that, although we should support him when he does valuable things for the long-term good of our public services, we insist that they be properly scrutinized and done in a honest and transparent way. We should give some more constructive thought to the practicalities of many of these things, particularly for those who work in the public services, who are getting shell shocked by the constant change and adjustment and the confused accountability.

Again, it may be a worry that the Prime Minister, if he is in a hurry and has an 18-month or two-year agenda, has big foreign policy issues that he has to bring to an end. He should feel an obligation to his successor to do something to get near to resolving the questions of Iraq and Europe before the Chancellor takes over and gets out from the mess that he has left behind for someone else in economic policy.

As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife said in a speech with which I almost entirely agreed, the problem with Iraq is that we still do not have a clear policy to bring to an end our tragic involvement with the problems of that country. The question of withdrawal and the policy between now and withdrawal remains something that worries me considerably. We get too much optimistic briefing. Too many false dawns are offered as stages go on. It looks as though the history of that tragic country will be very difficult over the next few years.

I do not agree with those who say that we should withdraw our troops when the present UN mandate expires. I was totally opposed to our taking part in the invasion, but it would be absolutely irresponsible to pull out at the termination of the mandate, leaving behind possibly anarchy, civil war and chaos, for which we will bear a share of the responsibility. However, I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we seem to be on a slightly timeless course where we are not quite sure when we are going to get out. The idea that we will stay there for as long as the Iraqi Government ask us to stay, and until such time as Iraqi forces are completely able to guarantee security themselves for a legitimate and stable Iraqi Government, puts us on a timetable, which I can only guess could be three, four, five or six years. We already face a serious problem. There is a very narrow dividing line where the foreign troops are absolutely essential for the maintenance of security but are in constant danger of providing, as a foreign occupying power, a focus for insurgency, recruitment to insurgency and the fomenting of dissent by those who want to foment dissent inside the country.

The next few months will be very difficult. If the new Government can achieve a life of any length, they will have immense difficulty in producing a constitution that is acceptable to the bulk of people who want to live in a law-abiding Iraq. We have to concentrate on the stage at which—it will not be a perfect stage—we will withdraw, either at the end of that process or shortly after they get there.

The Government's reactions remain opaque. There has been no clear guidance from them on where they think they are going. My fear is that, as too often throughout the whole experience, it will be the American Government who determine when we withdraw. It will be an American political decision as to when their public have grown exhausted with the effort. Meanwhile, far too much time will be spent trying to influence the nature of political evolution in Iraq without concentrating on putting security in place and letting people solve their own problems.

I do not intend to dilate on Europe at length, although I will not disappoint the right hon. and learned Gentleman entirely. I spoke on Second Reading of the European Union Bill. I agree with my hon. Friends who say that there should have been two Bills, because the votes that hon. Members cast on that Bill in the previous Parliament were totally ambiguous. I am in favour of the treaty but I am against the idea of having a referendum. Most of my party were against the treaty but in favour of having a referendum. We all at least agreed that we would vote on the treaty, so I voted for the Bill and they voted against it, but it would have been much more sensible to have two separate Bills. We will no doubt argue that at length if the issue takes off in this Parliament, but I merely refer to my view that the constitutional treaty is an essential way of making the newly enlarged Union work. It does not involve any significant new transfers of powers. It puts in place a more workable arrangement for making a Union of nation states work in co-operation with each other, and it seems that no clear alternatives have been presented.

I make one point relevant to today's debate—my usual note of dissent. The whole European debate in this country is in limbo. At the election, no one wanted to talk about it, including me. All three political parties were divided on the issue. All three were embarrassed by it. That is why the Front Benchers decided that it should be nothing to do with Parliament but should be referred to a referendum at some time in the future.

Now we are all waiting for the referendum in France, which will determine what on earth we will talk about from the end of this month onwards. It is a great pity that the French are to hold a referendum. It reinforces my view that all referendums are a complete lottery. I suspect that President Chirac would never have held a referendum if our Prime Minister had not put him on the spot by making a sudden, weak decision over the weekend to hold a referendum here. We wait to see what the French views are on the admission of Turkey, the popularity of President Chirac, the popularity of Prime Minister Raffarin and whether they feel uncomfortable about the impact of globalised competition on the French social system. They will vote yes or no according to their views on those various subjects. If the French vote no, I think that by general agreement all bets are off and the European leaders had better get down to deciding which bits of the procedural parts of the treaty should be rescued in order to make at least the functioning of the Councils and the voting system work better thereafter. I cannot for the life of me see the point of holding a British referendum on an extinct treaty if the French have rejected it. I do not like referendums anyway, but I do think that the British public will regard with amazement their political class insisting on having a referendum asking a question about whether they approved of a treaty that the French left had killed off 10 months before.

It would be a triumph if we could persuade 10 per cent. of the population to vote in such a referendum. What on earth in the end they would vote about I cannot possibly imagine. But we keep regarding it as desperately important to get the Minister to continue to commit himself to the foolish remarks of the Prime Minister that he was going to hold this referendum anyway. Sooner or later someone has to have the sense, almost in a "the emperor has no clothes" way, of saying that this is a complete waste of time, and if the French reject the treaty, perhaps both sides, with great respect, should start rethinking exactly what their European policy is now, and bring some more of it back to Parliament.

Chris Bryant: One other possible outcome is that the French say yes but the Dutch say no. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman think that in those circumstances we should none the less proceed with a referendum—notwithstanding his hatred of referendums?

Kenneth Clarke: I think in that case we should have a referendum, although it would be a very serious problem and we would have to address whatever European points the Dutch were raising, to try to get the Dutch on side in due course. But I would prefer instead to see the Dutch put on the spot, saying, "Twenty-four other countries have ratified, so what exactly do you want to do now in order to keep inside the Union?", as the Dutch would.

The other important piece of European business that we have to transact concerns the whole question of European economic reform and the discussion we have about the working time directive. There, I have to say—I think that most British politicians agree—I am firmly on the side of the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he makes speeches about the need for economic reform inside the European Union. Indeed, he makes speeches of the kind that I was making when I was Chancellor of the Exchequer before him.

I am firmly opposed to the working time directive; indeed, I used to have these arguments with Jacques Delors 10 or 20 years ago—no, 10 years ago, at the birth of the social chapter. It is extremely important that we get it across to the French and the Germans, and the social democrat element of the European Parliament, that protectionism of the kind they are proposing—trying to protect their own very restrictive national labour legislation against competition from the eastern Europeans and ourselves—is doing great harm to the European economy and is actually making us all extremely vulnerable to competition from the Chinese and the Indians if we do not succeed in overcoming this.

Jeremy Corbyn *rose—*

Kenneth Clarke: I wish the Government well in finding allies from central and eastern Europe and Scandinavia to block this attempt to get foolish legislation in this country. We can only do that because we are in the European Union and our force is greater there if we are an influential member of the European Union. If we were in the position of Norway, Iceland or Liechtenstein, we would have to comply with the working time directive—they do, in their trade in Europe. We would have to accept whatever decision came out of the European Union but we would have no voice in that decision, let alone the opportunity to play a leading and influential role in introducing economic common sense.

I conclude, as it is the Queen's Speech debate and the beginning of this Parliament, by touching on the other thing that I hope will emerge from the Government's weakened position. I hope that all these issues will be better handled, in a strengthened Parliament that has started to take a move back to make a weakened Government more accountable. A little humility is called for from the Government, this Prime Minister and his successor, in the way they handle these extremely important political affairs.

One of the most important things that we have to discuss in this first Session is the prevention of terrorism Bill that should be presented, because, as we all recall, in an all-night sitting at the end of the last Parliament we were promised new legislation on that subject which could be properly considered. I regard it as an acid test that we get that done properly. The discussion of that Prevention of Terrorism Bill was the lowest point in our parliamentary history for a very long time. An attempt was made to rush through a Bill that took away the civil liberties of the constituents of the hon. Member for Leicester, South and many others, with no debate in the House at all, except about a letter that described the changes that were going to be made, before the Bill went to the House of Lords and ping-pong took place between us. Fortunately, parliamentary sovereignty was reasserted because we wrung from the Government changes and promises of proper legislation. But what proper legislation are we going to have?

All the Bills we are talking about should come to this House for a proper Second Reading and be subjected to proper scrutiny. The timetabling of Bills, which has increasingly ensured that nothing is properly scrutinised, that the Government select the parts of Bills that are debated, and that the whole thing is trundled through to the House of Lords, is bad enough. But the Queen's Speech contains no proposal for reform of the House of Lords, when the vast majority of Members of this House wish to see a largely elected House of Lords. We do not want to hear again the House of Lords being referred to as the unelected second Chamber which we should override. The members of the unreformed House of Lords were actually the heroes of the Prevention of Terrorism Bill, but I wish to see a more legitimate House of Lords, which can do that more often to a Government who are misusing their majority.

It is proposed that there should be a Committee. I have served on one of these Joint Committees, which went nowhere. And what is the Committee to consider? If I may briefly describe its agenda, it is to consider ways in which the powers of the House of Lords might be emasculated, before this House is given the opportunity to debate what its composition and future existence should be. I hope that no one sensible will serve on such a Committee, and I do trust that we will reject this whole approach to reform. We need two Houses of Parliament—

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way on this, because I sat on the same Committee with him in the last Parliament.

John Bercow: It did not achieve very much.

Chris Bryant: And it did not achieve very much. But I remember the right hon. and learned Gentleman arguing for precisely this process throughout those Committee meetings.

Kenneth Clarke: Well, I remember that the Committee was agreed that the powers of the House of Lords were largely satisfactory and should be left as they were, and that we came round to the view that those powers could more effectively and properly be exercised by a House with greater legitimacy and one that was elected, but on a quite different basis and for a different term from the House of Commons. I believe that that could quite easily be agreed upon by the majority of Members of all parties now, if we had a proper Bill before us. That is where we had got to. I do not think that the powers of the House of Lords should be reduced.

All 45 Bills should be put through a better parliamentary process. The European constitution Bill is regarded as very important—certainly by the shadow Foreign Secretary, who gives a description of it which I do not altogether agree with on the facts—but we used to give these important Bills two days in Second Reading debate. They were taken on the Floor of the House; they were not timetabled as soon as we started. The prevention of terrorism Bill, when it comes back, will deprive us of our civil liberties. I was one of those who said that we cannot have jury trial in all these cases; there must be some confidentiality for the protection of the security services. These are very dangerous matters, where we will deprive someone of their liberties under circumstances falling far short of the normal criminal process in this country. That should have two days on Second Reading; it should have protracted consideration in this Chamber. Because on all these things, big and small—but particularly the big ones—this House should not act lightly, with most Members of Parliament deprived of the opportunity of taking part in discussion, and with the Whips mainly concentrating on trundling the thing along.

Outside comment on the state of this Parliament and the Prime Minister's valedictory term has tended to concentrate on whether the Labour Whips are going to have great difficulty with the 25 or 30 usual suspects in getting their Bills through. Well, rather embarrassingly I found myself agreeing with the usual suspects on quite a lot of issues in the last Parliament and it could be possible that I will do so again on foreign affairs, if not on domestic matters—but that is not the whole point.

Parliament as a whole should function. Members as a whole, not just the left wing of the Labour party, do have views on these matters. We are turning ourselves into a sausage machine, producing vast quantities of ill-thought-out legislation in order to show signs of activity on subject after subject. The Prime Minister may be impatient to set about his last phase of government in that way; it is time that this Parliament asserted itself and said he should not be allowed to do so.

Let us go back to better government and better parliamentary government; let us address the terrible lack of trust in politics, in the political process and in Parliament that is afflicting the public at the moment, and which we all felt at the last election. So let us handle this Queen's Speech in a way that the last quite dreadful and enfeebled Parliament really did not handle—was not allowed to handle—its business before it left and was replaced by all of us here.

1.59 pm

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Kenneth Clarke) entertained the House with a characteristically fluent and amusing speech and made some very cogent points as well. I must disagree with his suggestion that the Government wasted their first term of office—or did he say their first two terms? I can only tell him that most of my constituents—I suspect that this may also be true of many of his constituents—are considerably better off now than they have been within recent living memory. I shall not follow him down the many paths that he wanted to lead us.

As hon. Members can see, I am back again in my natural habitat, having made two visits to government. The first was not a wholly happy experience, but the second was: I greatly enjoyed the two years that I spent at the Foreign Office as Africa Minister. It was a great pleasure to work with the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), and the Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Hilary Benn), who are two of the most effective and competent members of the Government. During my time there, I felt that we were achieving something: Africa is a continent about which we can hold our heads high these days, given what we are doing there and the role that we play in the world in relation to it. Not that there are no problems—there are, and the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) mentioned Darfur, which I will touch briefly on in a moment.

As hon. Members know, we count the votes very fast in Sunderland, and there has come a moment on each of the past four election nights when, for 40 or 50 minutes, I am the only Member of Parliament in the country. It is very tempting to form one's own Government during that time. On all those occasions, I have resisted that temptation, but in the light of what happened to me a few days after this election, I rather wish that I had not.

I cannot disguise my disappointment at leaving a job that I loved in a Department where I greatly enjoyed working, but that is all that I wish to say about my personal position, although there is a general point: I was the fifth Africa Minister in eight years and my noble Friend Lord Triesman will be the sixth. I wish him well, but I wonder, if we take Africa as seriously as we say we do, whether we could not just leave a Minister in place for long enough to establish the personal relations—indeed, I did establish them, as did some of my predecessors—and maintain them with the African leaders with whom we have dealings. A distinguished African who passed through my office told me that he had never met the same Minister twice. That is a rather unsatisfactory situation.

There is a wider point, too. We have had six Asylum and Immigration Ministers so far, seven Europe Ministers, nine Ministers with responsibility for entry

clearance, of whom I was also one, and the Department of Health has been more or less cleaned out twice in the past 18 months or so. I know that decisions on such matters are for people far above my pay grade, but I gently wonder whether that is the most efficient use of resources and officials' time and whether we get the best out of people by reshuffling the pack with such terrifying rapidity.

I was glad to see in the Gracious Speech the references to the forthcoming G8 summit over which we will preside and where I expect us to play an important part. I am glad that the Prime Minister has decided that Africa and global climate change are the two main issues that we shall seek to push up the agenda. Getting Africa into the councils of the G8 and, indeed, those of the European Union has been significantly helped by our Commission for Africa report. Although I was sceptical about that report at first, it has been rather a success and, unusually for documents of that kind, it is fluent, easy to read and the arguments are set out with beautiful clarity.

There is a reference, too, in the Gracious Speech to Darfur, and the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife was right to draw our attention to that. The problems there have not gone away; there are no easy solutions. I am not convinced that the one that he suggested would necessarily work. The path down which we have gone is to give support to the African Union force, which we hope will increase to 7,000 or 8,000 troops, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe said. We have played a leading part in providing support to the African Union. Sooner or later, there must come a point where we invest in African solutions to African problems, and this is one of the first big tests. Given Darfur's geographic isolation and the horrendously complicated politics, tribalism and factionalism that exist there, it will be a very difficult task for any outside force, under whatever banner it travels, but we must not take our eye off the ball, because there has been a huge humanitarian catastrophe and there is the potential for a far greater one.

I shall turn briefly to the number of Bills. Many Bills in the Queen's Speech will be welcomed by my constituents, especially those that address aspects of the yob culture that blights the lives of so many of them. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe made the point, first, that there are rather a lot of Bills and, secondly, that we have had a tendency to rush them through and that they sometimes come here ill-drafted. That has been the case for a long time. It happened under his Government as much as under ours. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Oh yes it did. Oh Lord it did.

Under the previous Government, I served on Standing Committees where Bills were rewritten from end to end and then went to the Lords where they were completely rewritten again, so let us not pretend that that phenomenon began after 1997. The big step forward in the last Parliament was that we were beginning to take a systematic approach to pre-legislative scrutiny and, to some extent, were using Select Committees for that purpose, too. That is what must happen. That is the future if we are to start to produce more satisfactory legislation, and I hope that the Government will make a big effort to draft as many Bills as possible sufficiently in advance so that pre-legislative scrutiny can be undertaken. It is in the interests of the Government, Parliament and everyone to get those things right.

I wish to address a couple of issues that were omitted from the Gracious Speech. First, I saw no reference to our commitment to sign the United Nations convention on corruption. I know that some legislative changes are required before we can do that, but I should like the Minister to say when he replies what plans we have to get on with that. It is becoming a bit of an embarrassment, and one increasingly hears distinguished foreigners asking why the UK has not signed the convention. Indeed, I was asked that very question last night at a conference at Wilton Park.

I also wish to raise, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), the question of the next generation of nuclear weapons, because a decision on that issue falls due during this Parliament. Indeed, I am aware that some sort of preliminary decision was taken in January 2004. Those of us who have been around for a while recall what happened under the Callaghan Government with Chevaline, when a decision was taken to go ahead with the new generation of nuclear weapons without reference to the whole Cabinet, let alone to Parliament. Most members of the Cabinet and Members of Parliament found out about the decision only when a Tory Government Front-Bench spokesman revealed it some years later. I hope that we will not go down that road again. It is a very serious decision and I hope that it will be brought to Parliament for discussion before any irrevocable decisions are taken.

The world has changed a great deal since 1977, and we should perhaps ask ourselves—people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North have been asking this question for many years, but it is even more relevant now—whether we need a new generation of nuclear weapons, whether the large sums that we might invest in them could not be better spent in another way and whether we would not gain ourselves some credit in the international community by voluntarily giving up what, frankly, is not a lot of use to us anyway.

Kenneth Clarke: The hon. Gentleman made an intriguing reference to a preliminary decision having already been taken in 2004. I do not follow defence matters as closely as many Members, but could he remind me of what preliminary decision has been taken? Has any decision been taken other than to carry out a study of the implications and problems involved in renewing our capability?

Mr. Mullin: I think that the Government's position is that all options are still open, but there was some discussion at a high level 18 months ago. I do not think that any firm decision has been taken and my point to the House—I repeat it now—is that I hope that the issue will come before Parliament while there is time to influence it in one way or another.

Sir Menzies Campbell: Does the hon. Gentleman perhaps have in mind the reports that preliminary work had started at both Aldermaston and Burghfield? If my recollection is correct, those reports surfaced about 18 months ago.

Mr. Mullin: I do, indeed, have in mind those reports, which have been in the public domain for some time.

[Mr. Mullin]

I also wish to say a word about our relationship with the United States. The Gracious Speech talks of strengthening and deepening relations between the US and the European Union, and I am all for that. However, we should not appease the US when it does things of which we do not approve. Occasionally, we have to stand up to the US and, I am glad to say, we do from time to time. I remember not long ago that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary stood very firm when the US tried to kibosh the International Criminal Court. It backed down; that is the point. The other members of the international community stood up to the US and my right hon. Friend played a leading part in that. The US backed down when confronted. We should do that a bit more.

Also, we should not turn a blind eye to the indiscriminate killing of civilians that, in my experience, has been a feature of all American military activity, and is a feature of such action in both Iraq and Afghanistan. I noticed the other day that even President Karzai of Afghanistan—there is no more loyal ally of the US—spoke out about the indiscriminate nature of American military activity.

I am glad that we worked hard to rescue the half-dozen or so British citizens who were interned at Guantanamo Bay. However, some people who have been resident in Britain for a very long time—not citizens—are also there. We have no legal obligation to help retrieve them, but we have a moral obligation to do what we can, not least because I think that our security services may have had something to do with getting them into Guantanamo Bay in the first place. I hope that we will continue to pursue those cases.

I am also concerned at increasing reports of a secret gulag into which terrorist suspects disappear. They are being ghosted round the world and, in some cases, torture is contracted out to third countries. Egypt and Syria have been mentioned. Some of these people are completely innocent and appear again looking dazed and confused nine months later without any question of due process having taken place. We should not turn a blind eye to that, and I believe that the Americans have a word for it.

Sir Menzies Campbell: Rendition.

Mr. Mullin: Yes, "extraordinary rendition". We ought to know a little more about extraordinary rendition and should not close our eyes to it. We are supposed to be fighting for democracy and the United States says that it is signed up to the same values as we are. Let us make sure that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. I repeat my question on the contracting out of torture, because I have even seen it suggested that one of the assertions made by Colin Powell in his famous—perhaps one should say notorious—United Nations speech was based on information extracted under torture. That is the other point about torture: one does not always get the correct information and it does not do anyone any good in the long term. It diminishes us all. I hope that we shall pay some attention to what is going on. We are all against terrorism and have all signed up to fighting the war against it. However, we are not obliged to close our eyes to the excesses of our allies in that cause. If it becomes necessary for us to sup with a slightly longer spoon with the United States, so be it.

In conclusion, I return to my point about the next generation of nuclear weapons. I seek from the Minister an assurance that some discussion of that issue will be brought here to Parliament while there is still time to influence it. I would be grateful if someone could report back in the closing speeches.

2.15 pm

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). He obviously has a huge knowledge of African affairs and I hope that it is put to good use by the Government. However, I would not be so bold, as a new Member, to suggest what that should be.

It is a great honour to rise to speak as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Monmouth. I do so knowing that Monmouth has always enjoyed representatives of the highest calibre. Huw Edwards, my immediate predecessor, was very well known for his pleasant disposition and for his very hard work as a constituency Member of Parliament. Over the years on many occasions, we shared platforms—he as the Labour Member of Parliament, I as the Conservative Member of the Welsh Assembly—but both representing the same constituency and, more often than not, both on the same side. I commend the way in which he was always willing to put aside any personal political differences to work for the good of the local community.

Both Huw Edwards and the other main candidate, Phil Hobson, the Liberal Democrat mayor of Chepstow, fought the campaign with dignity and courtesy. It is my belief that both are clearly motivated by a love of the area in which we all live and a desire to better the lives of those who live there.

Previous MPs for Monmouth also distinguished themselves: Roger Evans, as a Social Security Minister; Sir John Stradling Thomas, as deputy Chief Whip; the right hon. Donald Anderson, who chaired the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs; and Lord Thorneycroft, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer. I cannot possibly hope to match that array of achievements but, if in four years or so I am thought of as a good constituency Member, I shall feel that I have achieved a great deal. One thing that all of us have had in common is a desire and a commitment to better the lives of all those who live in the constituency.

Although it is called the Monmouth constituency, it is much more than the market town from which it takes its name. Years ago, it was a sizeable part of south-east Wales. These days, the constituency is still large and includes of the towns of Abergavenny, Usk, Croesyceiliog, Raglan and Tintern as well as countless other small villages and great swathes of countryside.

As a border county, it is rich in both history and historians. Geoffrey of Monmouth chronicled the Arthurian legends in the 12th century and Adam of Usk gave us graphic accounts of the battles of Owain Glyndwr. Glyndwr was a Welsh landowner who fell out with King Richard II in about 1400, and much of the county was laid to waste by the battles that subsequently raged throughout as he tried to set up an independent

republic of Wales. That early brush with devolution seems to have had a lasting impact on the population, as they voted overwhelmingly against a Welsh Assembly.

Some 130 years after Glyndwr's disappearance, Henry VIII caused further problems when he decided to embark on an early form of local government reorganisation. Deciding that Monmouthshire was more prosperous than the rest of Wales—a mistake that, unhappily, continues to be made today—he decided to make it part of the Oxford court assizes while the rest of Wales remained a separate area for judicial purposes. Official documents, including some that emanated from the House over the years, then began to refer to "Wales and Monmouthshire", which gave rise to the belief that the county was actually a part of England and that its supposed annexation into Wales after the 1974 boundary changes clarified the situation was nothing more than a conspiracy to drag the inhabitants back into the Principality of Wales from England. By the way, some of those people have already been in contact with me looking for surgery dates, which should be interesting.

The belief in Monmouth's prosperity continues to be widely yet incorrectly held. Like many other rural areas, Monmouth has suffered significant problems over the years, some of which were local, with others more national. I certainly want to use my role to fight on many local issues. I will fight for a new livestock market, which will be needed when the old one in Abergavenny closes down, a new river bank defence scheme to protect us from another outbreak of the disastrous flooding that occurred in Monmouth a few years ago, and to improve the regeneration of Chepstow by sorting out its traffic management problems. Of course, I am also upset about recent legislation that has undermined the fallen livestock collection service and threatened the viability of many farms. I might return to that subject when we are allowed to be more controversial.

There are many small schools throughout my constituency, such as Ponthir, Llanover and Llanelly Hill, that face closure irrespective of their academic results. Last year, Ponthir school had the best standard assessment test results of any school in the borough of Torfaen, yet the local education authority still wants to slam shut the school gates for ever.

Although the agriculture and tourism industries on which we depend so much have suffered, especially as a result of foot and mouth, great strides have been made in developing the specialist food industry. Abergavenny Fine Foods exports cheese all over the world, while Brooks Dairies makes what I think is the best ice cream I have ever tasted—by the way, it did not sponsor my campaign in any way.

Many people are employed in manufacturing industry if not actually in my constituency, just on the outskirts. Such companies include what I remember as Lucas Girlings, for which I worked, although it is now called Verity. The success or failure of those industries depends greatly on developing a foreign policy that allows Britain to trade freely with the rest of the world and, dare I say it, does not necessarily depend on us tying ourselves into an economic straitjacket with other countries in the EU.

As we are debating defence, may I take this opportunity to commend the R Mon Royal Engineers, who have been active over the past year or so rebuilding Iraq? What is remarkable about the work of the Royal Engineers—many of its members live in the town of Monmouth—is that the people are all volunteers and members of the Territorial Army. However, when the call came, they were happy to give up their jobs and go out to risk their lives rebuilding Iraq. I know that there are differences of opinion about the war, but whatever we might think about it, surely we can commend the people who give up nine-to-five jobs to go to Iraq and try to help the people who live there.

Back home, of course, those people and other constituents have been exercised by the recent council tax rises, which have added to the problems of people in rural areas who buy their own homes. Council tax in Monmouthshire has risen by about 130 per cent. over the past five years, which has happened because we use a formula that does not properly take account of the cost of delivering services in rural areas and because all too often the Welsh Assembly imposes extra burdens on local authorities, such as the teachers' work load agreement, without properly funding them.

The recent rebanding exercise that has taken place in Wales—it will soon follow in England—has added to our woes. Some 40 per cent. of properties in Monmouthshire have gone up by at least one band, but many have gone up by two or even three. A one-band increase means a 25 per cent. rise overnight. However, a sum equal to the extra money collected by local authorities is being withheld by the Welsh Assembly from the local government settlement, which means, in simple terms, that people are paying more, but will not see an extra penny spent on local services. I hope that the House will learn from the mistakes of the Welsh Assembly, especially before it gives any consideration to giving the Assembly extra powers.

I hope that we will learn from what has happened with council tax and the effect that that has had on the affordability of homes. By reducing the burden of council tax, we could increase the opportunity of home ownership—nothing could be more important to any of us than that. A nation in which home ownership is limited to only the wealthy is a nation divided.

I became involved in politics because I believed passionately that we must try to end divisions in society and help to build a cohesive society. We should have a society in which all of us have an equal chance to get on, with an equal chance to get into the best schools and universities, to hold a rewarding job and to own our own homes. Regardless of the differences that I am sure that I will have with Labour Members over the years, I believe that we should all be working for that vision. That belief is certainly as strong on this side of the House today as it was in the days of Disraeli. It is as relevant in the back streets of my home town of Newport as it is in the bistros of Notting Hill. For as long as I continue to serve as the Member of Parliament for Monmouth, I shall fight locally for my constituents and nationally to create the cohesive, one-nation society in which all have the chance to succeed.

2.26 pm

Peter Luff (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I rise with both surprise and humility: surprise that there is not more competition from Labour Members to laud the Government's achievements on international affairs

[Peter Luff]

and defence; and humility following the two excellent maiden speeches to which the House has been treated. I am from the Marches myself—Monmouth does not seem so very far away from Worcestershire—but I have learned things today that I did not know. That just goes to show that sometimes one can learn things from speeches made in the House of Commons.

I salute the passion of the speech that we have just heard and also its messages, which are widely shared among Conservative Members. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) on a speech at which he will look back with pride in years to come. The same is true of the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby), although I think that I know which of those two characters will be more trouble to his Whips Office—I speak as someone recently released from the burdens of that office. However, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a fine speech.

It is customary to say that we have had a good debate at this stage of our proceedings on the Queen's Speech, but it is true. The debate has been characterised by many fine speeches. I was interested to sit next to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Kenneth Clarke) during his contribution. He was harsh on the Prime Minister and I certainly share his harsh analysis of the Prime Minister's record. However, he perhaps missed one thing that I rather wish that he had done as Chancellor of the Exchequer: independence of the Bank of England. The Government might just be remembered for that; it is perhaps their sole claim for a place in the history books of the United Kingdom.

It was a pleasure to hear the speech made by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). He told us that he was the first MP elected at the general election and for a period the only MP of the new Parliament. That reminds us of the person who I hope will be our last MP elected in a few weeks time and who is sadly missing from our proceedings today. I think that I should refer to him by name because he is not currently a Member—you will correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker—but it would be nice to have Patrick Cormack back.

John Bercow: Sir Patrick.

Peter Luff: It would be nice to have Sir Patrick Cormack back with us in a few weeks.

The tests that we apply to a Queen's Speech are all different and personal, and I have four: does it enhance the freedom, security and prosperity of the subject; does it enhance our democracy; does it bring benefit to individual constituents, in this case those in Worcestershire; and does it contribute to a fairer and safer world, which is especially pertinent to today's debate? Let us first consider freedom, security and prosperity. I sometimes think that the only freedom in which the Government and Prime Minister believe is their freedom to be the Government and Prime Minister and that they believe that all other freedoms should bow down in abasement to that. That is sad because after the election that we have had, some humility is called for from all three major parties. Labour actually lost the popular vote in England, and only one in five voters supported it throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. Labour received the smallest vote share of a winning party. It is true that it has a majority in this place, but in my view it has no mandate.

Similarly, after a carefully targeted campaign, my party delivered a welcome increase in seats and, as we heard from those maiden speeches, we have some excellent new Members of Parliament. We have to be honest, however. Our vote share hardly increased at all, but had we managed an extra 1 per cent. or so on top of that smaller share, think how much smaller Labour's majority would have been.

The Liberal Democrats enjoyed moderate success, with a few new seats, but in the face of a spectacularly unpopular Prime Minister—those of us who were on the doorsteps know just how unpopular this Prime Minister has become—and despite being the only party to oppose the Iraq war, which is now also unpopular, although it was not at the time, they still could not get close to the vote share the equivalent party enjoyed at the height of the powers of Baroness Thatcher.

All three parties have lessons to learn. I was disappointed not to see more humility from the Prime Minister yesterday. He said:

"Let me gently remind"

my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition,

"however, which party won and which lost the election. He has 197 MPs. We have 256, and I stand here and he sits there."

That is rather like the football manager—I speak as a supporter of Chelsea football club, so this is a poignant comment—who celebrates a massive victory as a result of a goal that has been disallowed.

The Prime Minister went on to say:

"the Conservative party did not just lose the election—they lost the argument in the course of the election."

Of course, our real tragedy is that we won the argument many years ago, but that is not entirely apparent to many Labour Members, as I think the Prime Minister will discover during the course of this Parliament. He also said:

"The oddest thing about the election was that we were more interested in discussing Tory policy than the Tories were."—[*Official Report*, 17 May 2005; Vol. 434, c. 44.]

We wanted to discuss the policies that we actually had rather than the policies of the Prime Minister's febrile imagination.

What does the Queen's Speech say about freedom? My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe talked about some of the dangers inherent in the forthcoming prevention of terrorism Act. There are dangers, too, in the identity cards Bill, as we know. The Government talk about taking measures to address the pensions crisis—a crisis of their own creation. Perhaps if the Bank of England's independence is this Government's greatest achievement, its worst legacy is the crisis in pensions. What about prosperity? There was no mention in the Queen's Speech of the Government's fiscal plans—their plans for taxation—but I think that we can guess exactly what third-term Labour tax increases we are likely to see.

The second test is that of democracy. Many Members on both sides of the House have said this and have nodded in agreement when others have said it, and it is

worth saying again: there are too many Bills in the Queen's Speech to enable proper scrutiny. That is of great concern. The hon. Member for Sunderland, South was right to say that previous Governments have needed to rewrite Bills in Committee, but at least the timetabling—or the lack of it—of those Committees enabled that process to take place. Sadly, Bills are now rushed through this place in a scandalous hurry and it is left to the other place to put right the massive deficiencies in legislation. I view with concern the Government's tentative proposals to reform the House of Lords. I do not think that they understand what an important job it does in serving British democracy.

For someone who says that there are too many Bills, it is perhaps a bit odd to say that I want an extra one, but as I said in my intervention on the Minister for Europe, we should have two Bills on the European constitution and the referendum, not one. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe might cast his vote in a slightly different way from how I cast mine, but we should have the right to express our views differently on the ratification of the treaty and the merits of a referendum. It is utterly unacceptable for the Government to muddle those two issues in the way that they intend.

Of course, the other important Bill is the one that belatedly, and, sadly, probably inadequately, seeks to restore some dignity and integrity to the voting system of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Government's refusal to embrace individual voter registration is bewildering. Their reason is that when it was applied in Northern Ireland, it led to a reduction in electoral rolls. Well, we probably needed to reduce the electoral rolls in Northern Ireland because that was part of the problem. It is crucial that votes cast at elections are cast with complete integrity and certainty. The Government's proposals, although welcome, fall well short of what is needed to re-establish faith in our democratic system.

Let us consider our constituencies, such as Worcestershire. There is a passing reference in the Queen's Speech to

"sustainable development and supporting rural services",

although I think that that boils down to a new quango that muddies the roles of existing quangos. There is nothing significant on the problems of agriculture and horticulture; nothing on fairer funding for shire counties such as Worcestershire, which has been left badly behind in terms of schools and other public services; nothing on the impact of the Licensing Act 2003 on village halls and shops, a problem that I shall return to during this Parliament; nothing on planning law and travellers, who in my constituency make a mockery of the planning system, something on which the Government's response is inadequate; and nothing to reverse the draconian and illiberal ban on hunting or to address animal welfare rather than class prejudice. In short, there is nothing much for rural shires at all. It is a very thin Queen's Speech, indeed, when viewed from a constituency perspective.

Today's debate, however, is about international affairs and defence. Again, I am genuinely surprised—this relates to the fourth test of whether the measures will build a fairer and safer world—by the apparent lack of detail and vision on those subjects. I got no sense that the Government deeply and genuinely understand the huge challenges and opportunities that face us in a globalised and fast-changing world. Although there are many aspects to that, I want to deal with just two of them: our relationship to India and our policies in relation to overseas development.

I choose India because it offers a huge opportunity for Britain, but we are not being ambitious enough and not talking about it enough. British business is not taking it sufficiently seriously. I also choose international development because it is, ultimately, the great moral challenge that we face as a nation. Of course, poverty lies at the heart of so much international instability. It has also dominated the debate so far.

On India, I have declared my interests in the register and have been a frequent visitor to the country in recent years. I endorse what the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) said about the structure of the Security Council. It reflects the environment of many years ago and not the realities of a post-cold war 21st century, so we should not have much faith in it. I look forward to India's early membership of the Security Council.

To be fair, I know that the Government launched a comprehensive strategic partnership with India in September last year. That charts a genuinely ambitious course for the relationship between our two democracies—the oldest and the largest in the world. I hope that the Government are putting their money where their mouth was last September and are giving serious thought to implementation of the partnership's key provisions. I am not clear that they are because the strategic partnership, of which the two Prime Ministers rightly spoke, needs to be built.

Let us consider some specific things on which progress is not being made in the way that it should be. The joint declaration pledged to energise collaboration in science and technology. Other countries are already doing that and moving much faster to establish contacts with India to take advantage of its knowledge economy. For example, United States companies have set up Indian research and development centres, and research there often outclasses work in the parent country. What is the British Government doing to encourage innovative methods for collaboration in science and technology, and to ensure that we as a nation benefit from that emerging resource?

On education, there has been a 400 per cent. increase in the number of Indian students in UK universities over the past four years. We derive huge benefits from their presence. In recognition of the value that students bring to economies, other countries have responded more generously than us. The United States has eased visa formalities and provides financial support to encourage the trend, because it recognises that both countries benefit from it.

What are we doing? We are making it more expensive for students even to have their visas renewed. Perhaps more worryingly, under the voluntary vetting scheme, Indian students are potentially barred from courses in science and technology, subjects on which they have, perhaps, the highest aptitudes. Do the Government have plans to encourage foreign students from India to come to Britain for higher education?

[Peter Luff]

On medicine, India has world-class medical facilities—I know because I have seen them—and biotechnology and pharmaceutical strengths that would surprise many in this country. Given our strength in those sectors, we should be an ideal partner. That was a major feature of the New Delhi declaration during the Prime Minister's visit to India back in January 2002, and it was reiterated last September. The Governments agreed that they would focus together on key sectors in which we share such world-class expertise. That also relates to information technology. So what are we doing to build on this statement of intent? We have seen the words, but we have not seen the action—a familiar phrase from somewhere in recent weeks.

The outsourcing of medical facilities, pathological testing and cost-effective drugs could make a huge contribution to the British national health service. We could have joint research in medicine and collaborative ventures between medical institutions, all on a long-term basis, but it does not seem to be happening like it ought to.

Indian companies, meanwhile, are being harassed when they try to bring in short-term workers to work in many Indian enterprises now active in the UK. As far as I understand it—the Minister may correct me—India has co-operated wholeheartedly with the British authorities on immigration. A memorandum of understanding has been signed on speedy repatriation of immigration offenders and, I believe, India is on the white list of countries for asylum applications. So, it is a little strange that more is not being done to ease the transfer of professional staff between our countries.

The Government are devising a new points-based system for immigration and work permits, which, as we know, is common ground across the House. However, it seems that several categories of skills needed in the UK, particularly in the IT sector, cannot be included in the system. What are the Government doing to ensure that personnel with such skills, who need to be brought in quickly, are treated as a distinct category so that they and the companies that need them do not suffer from lengthy procedures, long delays and quota limits that a large immigration process necessarily involves? If the economic relationship between our two countries is to develop, it is very important that we have a fluent and smooth exchange of professionals.

Before I move on, I have a word to say on Kashmir. The way in which Pakistan and India are talking about the future of that troubled part of south Asia is hugely encouraging. It is wonderful to watch the establishment of a bus link, for example. I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend would agree that it is wonderful that cricket has played such a part in building relationships between India and Pakistan on the matter. However, it is a matter of some concern to me that the travel advisory is unnecessarily cautious. That is true of many travel advisories issued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Within India, tourism to Kashmir is booming, and it would be nice if British tourists were encouraged to make the journey there too. It is a truly fantastic part of the world, as I know from my visit to Srinagar.

Time is moving on, so I shall be brief and make my final comments on the subject of the developing world. I worry about the debate on the developing world because so much of it is characterised by learned, difficult and arcane debate among experts, who use acronyms, names, functions and conferences which are not easily comprehended by others who take an interest in the issues. In addition, so much of the debate among the campaigners is characterised by excessively simplistic solutions. So perhaps there is room for a third way—a middle way. It is crucial that the debate is engaged in widely.

There have been many false dawns. I had the privilege of working for Sir Edward Heath in 1980 at the time of the publication of the Brandt report. I remember the huge optimism that swept around the country at that time. It was probably one of the defining moments in the developing understanding among the British people of the need to do more to tackle poverty in the developing world. Only three years later, however, the follow-up report, which was also published by the Brandt commission, struck a much more depressing note.

So often over the past quarter of a century the story of development issues has been one of two steps forward, one step back—to be optimistic about things. I disagree with the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), who said that international issues had dominated the election and had been prevalent in his campaign. Apart from Iraq, I heard very little about development issues. That is probably because there is a healthy consensus across the House on the main issues of aid, trade and debt. That is not new. The issue is less politically charged than it used to be, but with that there is a danger that it will drop from the public consciousness. That must not be allowed to happen.

My party has made a welcome conversion and made a strong, clear and credible commitment to meeting a target of 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product in aid. That is a genuine commitment and I pay tribute to those on the Front Bench who have achieved it. The Government have also taken huge strides in understanding the importance of free and fair trade. I pay tribute to both International Development Secretaries for the way in which they have fought that corner.

Debt relief is of course also a matter of consensus. I am delighted at the way in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer—although, it has to be said, not always the Prime Minister—pays tribute to people such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and Sir John Major for their work on debt relief. I pay tribute to the way in which the Chancellor has bravely driven forward the issue in international negotiations. That is not always easy, as Britain is often more enlightened on these issues than some of our fellow members of the G8.

The consensus has largely been driven forward by the campaigners, particularly the Churches, which have done so much to keep the matter up the agenda, and I pay tribute to them. However, it has also been driven occasionally by great international crises. The general response of the British to the tsunami was heartwarming and encouraging, but sadly, dealing with such issues can sometimes lead people to believe that the problems are

not so deep-seated and that a one-off contribution at the time of a great crisis will address the fundamentals. That simply is not true.

The tsunami shocked the world and has had devastating long-term consequences for the people in the countries affected, but invisible tsunamis are sweeping Africa, in particular, every day. Although there is talk about the issue in places, the world does not seem to notice. The matter is not just about AIDS, which is sometimes talked about and which claims six lives a minute on the continent, but about malaria and tuberculosis, as well as malnutrition. A child in Africa dies every three seconds as a result of hunger or preventable disease. What a scandal that is. The annual death toll from poverty-related diseases is estimated to be about 18 million—a third of all human deaths. That means that, since the end of the cold war, some 270 million people have died unnecessarily.

I recently read a fascinating article by Thomas Pogg in a journal on ethics. He talked of our need to accept our own part in the continuing scandal of world poverty. He said:

"It is unthinkable to us that we are actively responsible for this catastrophe. If we were, then we, civilised and sophisticated denizens of the developed countries, would be guilty of the largest crime humanity ever committed, the death toll of which exceeds, every week, that of the recent Tsunami and, every three years, that of World War II, the concentration camps and gulags included."

He suggested that there are things that we could be doing to address global poverty that we are not doing. Perhaps that unthinkable truth is true after all. We all bear a share of the blame for this disaster.

John Bercow: Surely at least part of the problem is that, whereas the public are generous, public policy is not. Given that, as he and I agree—and there is widespread consensus across the House—current western agricultural dumping policies are both morally wrong and economically devastating to the developing countries, but have very strong, wealthy and articulate supporters in the international community, how in practical terms does my hon. Friend think that it will be possible to get the agreement that we need to scrap those subsidies to facilitate market access for poor countries and thereby to give them the chance that they need to compete and grow?

Peter Luff: I entirely agree with the importance of the issue cited by my hon. Friend. India, for example, has a potentially very successful dairy sector and could export large quantities of skimmed milk to the Gulf particularly, but is unable to do so because of the subsidised milk that is dumped there by the European Union. The United States of America, which so often lectures us about free trade, has scandalously subsidised agricultural production that is carefully concealed behind various different schemes. Digging down and discovering the true extent of American subsidy of agriculture is very difficult. My hon. Friend is right that there are deeply entrenched interests that will take a lot of challenging. If there is one thing that we could do to improve the lot of the developing world, it is to get the EU and the United States of America to stop subsidising exports. That would transform the life chances of millions of people around the world. How would we do it? We must carry on battling; I am not aware of any short-term solution. I hope that the World Trade Organisation will be robust and will not accept bullying from the United States of America and the EU.

I particularly welcome our commitment as a party to an advocacy fund, because one problem is that countries in the developing world are often unable to make the case with sufficient power in international forums and institutions. They do not have the expertise to do so. An advocacy fund is one practical way of helping them to make that case in the WTO. Addressing that problem is possibly the single most important thing.

I am delighted that my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition has tabled early-day motion 14—the first in his name on the Order Paper—which addresses this matter in such detail. I am a little sorry that the Prime Minister did not make more of the matter in yesterday's debate in the Queen's Speech, because he has every reason to be proud of the report of the Commission for Africa. It is a truly remarkable document. The International Development Secretary and the Chancellor also have their names on that report. The report shows the detailed work that needs to be done in many areas of policy. It is a weighty document by any standards, but an important one, which I hope that the Government will drive forward in this Session.

Ministers on the Treasury Bench have a unique opportunity this year. There is the G8 summit in Scotland in July, the EU presidency in the second half of the year and the UN General Assembly special summit on millennium development goals in September. Those goals are slipping hopelessly out of sight; there is no prospect of that target being met by 2015. They have the Commission for Africa, which they must pursue relentlessly. They have in the public mind the 25th anniversary of Live Aid, as well as the powerful Make Poverty History campaign.

I do not associate myself with all of the remedies proposed by the Make Poverty History campaign. Sometimes there is too much hostility toward the private sector, globalisation and free trade, and a lack of understanding of the complex way in which organisations such as the World Bank have to operate. The debate on reform of the sugar regime, in which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and I have been privately engaged during this debate, is a classic example of the difficulties. We heard earlier about the likely impact on Caribbean countries, but there is a hard judgment to be made. Opening up the trade in sugar might lead to massive deforestation in Brazil without corresponding benefits to that country's population. That could be the consequence of inappropriate reform. It is not always easy to get it right. None the less, the anger of the Make Poverty History campaign is an unmitigated, unqualified force for good. If the campaign can keep the Government committed to implementation of the excellent work that they have done on the Commission for Africa, and if it can drive our determination to tackle the greatest scar on humanity at the beginning of the 21st century, it will have done a good job indeed.

2.50 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) has made a wide-ranging speech and I am tempted to follow suit.

[Joan Ruddock]

I agree with him about the campaign to end poverty and pay tribute to the Ministers responsible for the production of the Commission for Africa report. However, I came to the debate intending to concentrate on one country in particular. I make no apology for that, because I think that the country in question requires the continuing attention of the whole international community, and, not least, of this House. That country is Afghanistan, and I am delighted to see the new Minister with responsibility for Afghanistan, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), in his place on the Treasury Bench.

Both the Queen's Speech and the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe opening today's debate set out the UK Government's continuing commitment to the Government of Afghanistan. Since the Bonn agreements of December 2001, we have been working with the Afghan people to secure their freedom, stability, human rights and democratic government. That has been a herculean task, not least because theirs is a country in which 1 million people died and almost as many were permanently disabled in a series of civil and in some cases internationally backed wars over more than two decades. Almost every major city has been destroyed. Fields were burned, ending all legitimate agriculture. Seven million people were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. State institutions collapsed and justice ceased to exist.

I commend to the House "A call for justice", a recent report by Afghanistan's independent human rights commission. It describes a national consultation on the lack of justice and the need for transitional justice arrangements in that country. The commission is led by a remarkable woman, Dr. Sima Samar. She and her team have shown enormous courage in travelling throughout the country, facing constant death threats, but engaging with ordinary people to seek their views on how they live now, as victims of all the atrocities that have occurred in their country.

The past three and a half years have brought some remarkable achievements that demonstrate the courage of the people of Afghanistan, such as those who formed the interim Government, and the commitment of the international community. They have achieved most of the major goals set out in the Bonn agreement, beginning with the emergency Loya Jirga and continuing with the constitutional Loya Jirga and the presidential elections. Reconstruction is under way—millions of children are back in school and millions of refugees are returning from Pakistan and Iran—but I would say that the challenges today outweigh the successes. There is progress in central Government in terms of both organisation and reach throughout the country, but there has been a signal lack of success in local government. There is no powerful mechanism to drive out corruption. Afghans have no trust in their police—with good reason. There is still no effective judicial system and violence is endemic, as can be seen in the outrages that have occurred in many cities in recent weeks and in the targeted attacks on international non-governmental organisations and on women.

I pay tribute to the work of the NGOs. Although they are usually headed by people from other countries, such as our own, they are almost always staffed by ordinary Afghans, who run constant risks in their daily lives delivering aid and services to the people of Afghanistan. Twenty-four NGO workers were killed last year, and already five have lost their lives this year. I also pay tribute to those who are standing up for organisation and transparency. Through various commissions on the civil service and the judicial system and in the police and army academies, many people are working to introduce the rule of law to Afghanistan.

There has been considerable success in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of the huge number of men who carried arms during the decades of war. The UK has been particularly active in this field. No fewer than 50,000 people have successfully gone through the DDR process, but even that enormous achievement is outweighed by the fact that in Afghanistan today, an estimated 150,000 men continue to carry illegal arms and to operate illegally.

In saying these things, my intention is not to diminish the remarkable achievements since Bonn or to underestimate our Government's considerable commitment and their successes in working with Afghans in various aspects of the redevelopment of their country. I say these things because I believe that Afghanistan is now in a particularly dangerous phase. The country is in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, which, having been twice postponed, are now scheduled to take place on 18 September.

In addition there are constant calls, especially in the United States, to reduce the scale of the international forces and the American military commitment to Afghanistan. The Afghan people need all the security that they can get. President Karzai has frequently sought an increase both in the numbers of forces and in the international community's commitment. An even greater danger is the possibility that, having succeeded in holding elections, as I hope and believe will happen, the international community will decide that that is a good time to reduce its presence in the country. That will be entirely justified if it is what the Afghan Government want, but I suspect that they will not want that; I suspect that both the Afghan Parliament and the Afghan Government will continue to demand international support. I urge our Government to do all they can to ensure that there is no security vacuum, either before the elections or immediately afterwards.

Let me now talk about the status of women. After 11 September, we all became familiar with figures in blue burqas flitting across our television screens. The whole world's sympathy went out to Afghan women, who were the most oppressed under the pernicious Taliban regime, and the international community said that women's rights must be restored in Afghanistan. People like me who stood up to support Afghan women were criticised; it was suggested that we were western feminists who were trying to impose our views on others. I have not met every Afghan woman; I have not even met those who live in the villages of Afghanistan. My contact has been limited to meetings with women from various parts of the country held during two visits to Kabul and here in London. But all the women to whom I have spoken want the same most fundamental and basic human rights for themselves as we women in the west want for ourselves.

Afghan women want rights. In their case they have, and accept perfectly well, arranged marriages, but they want the right not to be forced into a marriage. They want the right not to be sold by a man to settle a dispute with another man. They want the right for their girl children to go to school. The international community has enabled them to achieve that, for already a third of the children now in school are girls. They also want the right to vote, which they have exercised in the presidential elections. Further, they want the right to be able to work.

In every way, we need to be mindful of what Afghan women are saying and demanding. We must understand that we in the international community have a duty to support what they want. As recently as last year, in the Berlin declaration—a declaration that was made with international participation, including, obviously, the Afghan Government—this was said:

"The Government"—

meaning the Afghan Government—

"is committed to ensure that its policies and programs promote the participation of women in all sectors of the economy and society and in accordance with their rights in the Constitution. Concrete steps to be taken are to promote increased recruitment and guarantee equal opportunities to women in the Civil Service and to ensure that gender is mainstreamed within all sectors, programs and policies."

That would be a remarkable achievement for any Government, let alone a Government trying to form a democracy in the difficult circumstances that they face.

We need to contrast that commitment with the actual state of Afghan women today. To give hon. Members a snapshot, when the population statistics were being assembled in Afghanistan in recent times, we believed that we would find that as a result of the huge loss of men during the war, women would undoubtedly be more than 50 per cent. of the population; they are, of course, more than 50 per cent. of the populations of most developed countries. Yet what we now know is that of 22.2 million Afghans, the proportion of women is only 48.2 per cent. So the incredible haemorrhage of men due to war has been outmatched, or outpaced, by the haemorrhage of women. The life expectancy of men in Afghanistan is only 46; the life expectancy of women is 45. The causes of the deaths of these women—avoidable deaths and premature deaths—are poverty and pregnancy. Afghan women are among the very poorest in the whole world, and Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality. Seventy mothers and 700 children die every day in Afghanistan.

The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) spoke of tsunamis in Africa. For Afghanistan, a country with a population of little more than a third of that of this country, that death rate is the equivalent of a tsunami every year. Few Governments in the world prioritise the needs of women unless women themselves demand their human rights, and that is what Afghan women have been doing since 11 September, and what they are continuing to do today. That has been under the leadership first, of Dr. Sima Samar, then Habiba Sorabi and now Massouda Jalal.

Massouda Jalal took it into her head—I do not know how, although I have had many conversations with her, because I have not asked, "How did you think of doing this because it is so utterly extraordinary?"—that she would stand up for Afghan women by contesting the presidential elections, and she was a candidate in those elections. She did better than some of the men. Obviously President Karzai was elected, and he had the generosity to make her his Minister of Women's Affairs.

Women participated in that election to the extent of 40 per cent. That was a remarkable achievement, and one that we all hope will continue into the parliamentary elections. Sixty-eight of the 249 seats that will comprise the lower house of the national assembly are reserved for women. How are those women going to get into those 68 seats? There will be few women in this place who will not appreciate that it is more difficult for women to achieve parliamentary office than it is for men. Often the task is more difficult in practical terms because women have family responsibilities and often do not have the same incomes or spending money as men to pursue a political career. How much more will that be true in Afghanistan.

I am glad to say that the international community is already addressing that issue. I pay tribute again to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, which is making great efforts, not only by taking overall responsibility for the elections in Afghanistan but by addressing the particular concerns and needs of women voters and raising voter involvement while stressing, importantly, the secrecy of the ballot box. It is also making great efforts to provide support for women, especially the security that they require if they are to be campaigners. The EU and the UK Government are participating in such programmes.

When I was last in Kabul in March, I was delighted to be involved, as I had been earlier, in the British Council programme, which is encouraging women, particularly in the most recent workshops that it organised in Kabul and the video conference that was held between Washington, London and Kabul. It engaged with about 12 or 15 women, who had decided already that they would put themselves forward as candidates for the election. I was delighted to engage with them too, and to hear something that I think is well worth quoting from Massouda Jalal. During the video conference, she said:

"Values that underpin democracy—such as equality—are deeply rooted in Islam. Islam has much to tell us about social justice—and it teaches about the rights and duties of women as well as of men."

There can be no doubt that Afghan women wish to participate in the elections. They want to get elected. They need all the help that we can give them. There are already more women registered than the 68 needed for the reserved seats. The Minister with responsibility for women has made clear the extent to which they will need support, not only in being able to campaign effectively and get elected, but after the election.

For those who are not aware of what has happened, I should say something about the election system. A single non-transferable vote system has been adopted—a system used in very few countries in the world. It is supposed to favour individuals but may in effect favour organised groupings dependent on warlords and the drugs trade. None the less, that is the system that has been adopted, and the one in which candidates will have to compete. The system is particularly disadvantageous to women. Without a party organisation to support them, and standing as individuals, they will be especially disadvantaged, not least in terms of finance,

[Joan Ruddock]

organisation and the ability to travel. If women are to be elected to the Parliament, they will need further help which men might be able to do without.

We all come to this place with the means of running offices. We can provide ourselves with accommodation. We can travel back to our constituencies. All that will be essential for Afghan parliamentarians if the Afghan Parliament is to work at all. It will be extremely difficult to make it work anyway. For women who do not have a rich husband, there will be no means of providing themselves with all those facilities and being able to be a proper representative of their people, unless the international community engages with this topic. The Afghan Government do not have the means to provide that support. Many of the women who are standing are widows, and these women face an even greater disadvantage.

In conclusion, there is a need for security during and after the election, and for support packages for Afghan Members of Parliament. We must try to ensure that they have the opportunity to make their democracy work. On 21 June there will be a donor conference in London. Again, I congratulate the Government on the commitment that they have demonstrated by organising that conference. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will ensure that it is not gender-blind. It is extremely important that the donations, programmes and policies that receive support take account of women's needs. Election funding is critical. UNAMA says that the budget to run the elections is $50 million short, and one third of the money that is needed has not yet been raised.

There is therefore much to do before we can proceed further with reconstruction and the development of a fully fledged and legal economy. While I look forward to economic development, I hope that regard will be paid to the worth of women. Very often, the work that Afghan women do at home in the production of handicrafts and carpets, or as farmers in the fields, is not counted when policies are devised with the support of western advisers. I hope that our Ministers will deal with that—and we have just been joined by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, who is very much concerned with support for Afghanistan in general and women in particular.

Without justice for women there is no rule of law. Without the education and empowerment of women, families will always remain in poverty. Without the political participation of women there will be no real democracy in Afghanistan, and if it should fail again, that will be a failure of the whole international community.

3.12 pm

Mr. Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech early in this Parliament, particularly in a debate where there have been many valuable contributions. I should like to single out the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby), who mentioned De Montfort university. I worked for that university for four years and I was happy to have spent time in his constituency. It is a vibrant and interesting place to live in, and I am sure that he will enjoy representing it. In his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) spoke in no uncertain terms about the problems facing rural areas. As someone who represents a rural constituency, I look forward to many debates on those issues and hopefully the chance to address some of the problems.

My constituency of North Cornwall is the largest in Cornwall, and stretches from the border with England along the spectacular Atlantic coast to mid-Cornwall. Inland, it covers a varied landscape, from the china clay-mining belt across the wilderness of Bodmin moor to the Tamar. It includes the popular coastal resorts of Newquay, Padstow and Bude, the historic towns of Bodmin, Wadebridge, Camelford, Launceston, Stratton and St. Columb, and a vibrant network of village communities. Its people are independent-minded, with a strong sense of identity. Its economy is based primarily on smaller businesses and enterprise. Much employment in my constituency is concerned either directly or indirectly with the tourism industry, and Cornwall is rightly renowned as a wonderful place to visit and explore. It is also a wonderful place to live, and I had the privilege of growing up in my constituency. Agriculture and fishing remain important. Farmers are struggling against low prices for their produce, which are pushing many families out of farming. People involved in fishing face the difficulty of earning a living while fish stocks are protected.

I am pleased that there has been a growth in businesses that process food locally and manufacture high-quality goods that are sold across the country and abroad. Given my less than svelte figure, Members will not be surprised to learn that I am a devotee of that local delicacy, the Cornish pasty, and thus a supporter of the bid for protected geographical indication—PGI—status for the Cornish pasty, to ensure that only pasties produced in Cornwall to an authentic recipe can be called Cornish pasties. That would guarantee quality and secure many pasty-making jobs in my constituency.

As the new Member for North Cornwall, I am honoured to have taken over from such a respected parliamentarian as Paul Tyler. He is soon to be ennobled in another place, and I cannot think of anyone more deserving of such an honour. My first involvement in politics was at the age of 16, as a foot solider in Paul's campaign to win the North Cornwall seat in 1992. It is therefore particularly rewarding to become his successor. He was a fine constituency Member of Parliament, a tireless campaigner on many issues and, hon. Members have assured me, a popular Member in the House. I was delighted recently to make the acquaintance of Mr. John Pardoe, my predecessor in the constituency from 1966 to 1979. He, too, was a well loved representative of North Cornwall, and he still has many friends in the constituency who speak warmly of his dedication to duty.

As in all parts of Cornwall, many of my constituents, whether or not they were born locally, support the preservation of Cornish identity and culture. I was delighted to be able to take the Oath in Cornish. I have been denied the chance to be the first Member in modern times to use the language in the House, as that distinction is held by my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Andrew George). In preparation for this speech, I read his maiden speech, in which he referred to Michael

Joseph An Gof, the leader of the 1497 Cornish rebellion who was born in his constituency. The other leader of that march on London was Mr. Flamank, a prominent figure from my home town of Bodmin. The desire for recognition of the Cornish identity is as strong now as it ever has been, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and other hon. Friends to promote that cause. I listened with interest when the hon. Member for Monmouth spoke about his experience in the Welsh Assembly. I hope that, after the Queen's Speech, Parliament will have the opportunity to review the successes of the Welsh Assembly, and I look forward to a time when Cornwall has an assembly of its own.

In 2005, North Cornwall faces many challenges—some of them are perennial while others have come to the fore more recently—which I hope the Government will tackle soon. North Cornwall has more second homes than council houses, which distorts the housing market and devastates local communities, as shops, schools and other important amenities cannot survive in areas that are ghost villages for the greater part of the year. That exacerbates the effects of inward migration. Last year, the south-west had the biggest net inward migration into rural districts in the country. I note that the Government intend to reform support for housing costs, and I await their proposals with interest. Water charges are a huge burden on people in my constituency and, indeed, in the wider south-west. I hope to work with Members on both sides of the House to address that issue.

I am also concerned about the hard-won progress of the Cornish economy. The fact that new enterprises have been established and existing businesses have grown is due in no small part to the objective 1 programme. I hope that future opportunities to extend such investment will not be lost. We have heard contributions about the future of our relationship with the European Union, and I believe that the objective 1 programme has been a great success, particularly in Cornwall.

As we are discussing foreign affairs and defence, I should like to raise the future of the St. Mawgan airbase in my constituency. It is a major employer in the Newquay area. It is faced with an uncertain future and is to be—I believe the term is—mothballed, which unfortunately means that those employed at the base are concerned about its future, but it also means that we are not yet able to talk about what other uses there may be for the facility if it were to close at some point in the future. The base's future is also closely tied to the future of civilian Newquay airport. I hope to see greater security for both St. Mawgan and Newquay airport, and I have written to the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence and hope to have an early meeting with him on that subject.

Those then are the issues of great concern to my constituents and I look forward to seeing the detail of the Government Bills in this Parliament, in the hope that they may provide the opportunity to address at least some of them.

3.20 pm

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): We have heard so far today three extremely capable and erudite maiden speeches. I can only look back to four years ago when I made mine and wish that I had had the same confidence, ability and general articulacy as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Rogerson) has. I am extremely impressed by his maiden speech and I have absolutely no doubt that he will bring to the House exactly the same capabilities and erudition as the man whom he has replaced. I would like to say welcome to him. His part of the country is absolutely beautiful. It is a long way from Newark, where I come from, but none the less we are extremely pleased to have this gentleman in the House.

I come now to the subject of the debate today, which is foreign affairs and defence. We have heard a couple of extremely trenchant views, particularly on affairs in Iraq, and I want to take issue with some of the points made by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell). My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Kenneth Clarke), another Nottinghamshire Member of Parliament, referred to there having been a number of false dawns in Iraq, a phrase he used extremely well.

It is worth remembering that after the successful completion of the election there, the level of violence fell quite considerably. It is also worth remembering that as soon as the new Government were appointed, the level of violence rose most horribly. Despite the fact that Iraq now no longer dominates the front pages of our newspapers, or is the subject of the leading items of our evening television news programmes, the fact remains that literally hundreds of people a week are dying inside Iraq, and that the insurgency has a new urgency, a new violence and a new direction. It is much more focused. Instead of United States soldiers dying in their dozens and United Kingdom soldiers dying in ones and twos, we are now seeing particular elements of both Sunni and Shi'a populations dying in swathes. For instance, in Tikrit over the past month, 30 barbers have been targeted and killed. They have committed the primary sin of shaving the beards of those who no longer wish to be fundamentalists, and they have paid the price.

I could go on, but there is little doubt that Iraq continues to be a running sore. Because our boys are not coming home in body bags in any large numbers, because peace does not seem to be quite so urgent an issue now as it was before the election, that does not mean that swathes of people are not dying, for a cause about which I have many, many doubts. Having said that, I make no doubt at all about the fact that I voted for the war. I voted for it with reservations; none the less I voted for it. Therefore I and every other Member of the House who voted for the war have a responsibility to see that the situation in which we now find ourselves is carried through with dignity and courage to a proper conclusion. That is why I worry very much not only about the comments made by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife, but about Government defence policy. Sadly, there are no Defence Ministers on the Treasury Front Bench. I hope that those Ministers who are present will be kind enough to pass on my views.

It concerns me that we are talking about a timed withdrawal from Iraq. It concerns me that we are talking about following in the wake of the United States; that whatever policies they have and whatever political agenda they set, American timelines will dominate and ensure that British troops move according to their diktat, not to ours.

[Patrick Mercer]

It concerns me that we do not seem to have grasped the essential element of what is going on in Iraq. Large areas of the country are now peaceful. Any Members who have visited the country will know that. One can drive for many hundreds of miles without being conscious of any violence whatever, apart perhaps from the wreckage left behind after the Iran-Iraq war some decades ago. But some provinces are every bit as bad as they were when the invasion first occurred, and in some areas they are worse.

In my experience, one reason why people continue to revolt and to give succour, aid and military assistance to Islamist Jihadists who are coming into the country is the fact that reconstruction, rebuilding and aid are not progressing fast enough. There is no indigenous security force to speak of, and the police force and the army have not been rebuilt successfully because so many of them are killed before they can be recruited or trained, and many of them are so terrified of the prospect of serving their country that the numbers of policemen and soldiers are simply inadequate.

It is clear to me that if we wish rebuilding in all its aspects to continue, from equality for women, through education, through to the security sector at the other end of the spectrum, we in the west must continue to ensure that there is some form of security present. Money that is being dedicated cannot be spent if the non-governmental organisations and other bodies on the ground who will carry out the reconstruction are simply too scared or incapable of doing so because of the danger. Sadly, that means that troops must be present. Sadly too, that means that Iraqi indigenous forces must be trained in such a way that they are numerous enough to look after themselves when they have to take the field.

Yes, of course Britain must be looking for a time when her troops, treasure and money can be drawn down, when our boys can be brought home. But I urge the Government to understand and to honour the words of the Minister—that we must wait until the job is done. That is why I am so puzzled about one particular element of our defence policy, which is now widely known, and that is that the majority of our forces in Iraq will shortly be withdrawn to bolster the garrison in Afghanistan. I draw particular attention to the speech made by the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), which was not only excellent, but touched closely and clearly on the problems in Afghanistan. The fact remains that we simply do not have enough troops to garrison Afghanistan and to continue garrisoning Iraq. Harsh decisions must be made by Ministers. This year we will see the withdrawal of the Polish forces, our close allies, in multinational division central. They will withdraw and that will leave a gap for us to cover. Our American allies expect us to cover that gap, but will we do so? Do we have enough troops to take on that commitment and to allow the Americans to start their drawdown in the north? Do we have the political bottle to operate outside the Basra area? Do we have the courage to make the right commitment to the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army to make sure that that nation can stand on its own two feet? I wonder.

I am particularly puzzled by the decision, which appears already to have been made, to move large numbers of our troops from Iraq to Afghanistan. If we had more troops, it might make sense; if we do not have the troops, it cannot be done. I am extremely interested to hear how the Minister intends magically to create extra resources in order to conduct both of those tasks simultaneously.

While we plan to deploy the headquarters of the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps to Afghanistan and to maintain large numbers of troops in Iraq, we must examine the conditions of service for men serving in both of those theatres extremely carefully. To reduce the discussion from the strategic level to the tactical level, the Minister should be clear about the effect that the Trooper Williams case has had on every man who carries a rifle with live ammunition. In the Trooper Williams case, the judgment of a commanding officer—in that case, of the Royal Tank Regiment—under the Army Act 1992 was overturned in court, which means that no soldier can depend on the judgment and protection of officers who have seen soldiers in action and who understand the circumstances in which such difficulties have occurred. To overturn the judgment of a commanding officer is, at a stroke, to destroy Tommy Atkins' confidence in the officers who lead him.

How can the Government send troops on operations and make some of them redundant when those troops are facing this country's enemies? The Army is currently gapping 190 majors' posts, so why have the Government decided to make 180 such officers redundant? Why have some of those officers received that news when they are facing this nation's enemies? I could go on.

After regiments return from Iraq, they start operational training to deploy to either Afghanistan or Northern Ireland within four months. Many career courses inside the Army are now under-subscribed because non-commissioned officers and junior officers are seeking to spend more time with their families rather than qualifying themselves for further promotion. That situation is unprecedented in the Army, and the Ministers must examine it urgently.

When soldiers go to places such as Afghanistan and Iraq in order to re-establish democracy, they should not find that their own Government have disfranchised them from this country's general election. A considerable number of servicemen failed to vote in the past general election, and I have no doubt that the Minister will try to address that problem, because it is deeply demoralising for soldiers to find that they cannot influence their own Government.

If one has served in the countries that I have described, it is difficult to face the disbandment of one's own regiment on one's return to this country. There has been a lot of talk that the regimental system is unimportant—the previous Secretary of State for Defence said that his local county regiment was "looking forward" to being scrapped—but it is utter nonsense. The regimental system has served us well, and it continues to serve us well. It would be an error to tinker with it, and it would not make sense to turn it on its head.

A reduction in current numbers of infantryman while, yet again, the Army faces a recruitment crisis, does not make sense. If, at the behest of Ministers, the Ministry

of Defence intends to move large numbers of combat soldiers from Iraq to Afghanistan, there will be no room to remove four combat battalions.

The next few months will be extremely challenging as the problem in Iraq unfolds and evolves. If the Government are serious about pursuing a noble cause in Iraq and supporting the Iraqi people in their move towards freedom and independence, our troops and armed forces must be properly supported, manned and resourced. The Government cannot give a bad deal to the men and women whom they choose to put their lives on the line. The situation must not be allowed to continue, and I shall be interested to hear the Minister's response.

3.34 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me at this stage. To use the term employed by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), you have released me from "extraordinary rendition", which many other Members who are waiting to make their maiden speeches have been experiencing.

Yesterday, Mr. Speaker gave some good, sound advice to those of us who are new Members to the House and told us that we should seek out older Members to find out what is required from us. In my case, it would be more accurate to say that some of the older members of my party—I think that they were more nervous about this speech than I was—sought me out to offer me some advice. My party leader, my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), told me that I must remember to do three things, the first of which was to say nice things about my constituency. That is not difficult, although I must say, having listened to some Members who have given their maiden speeches here today, that I may have some difficulty in emulating their inventiveness and descriptions. I did not realise that so many estate agents had been elected in the new intake.

The second thing that my hon. Friend told me to do was to say nice things about my predecessor. Having spent the past four and a half years trying to get rid of him, I thought that that might present some difficulty, but I will seek to do it. The third, and perhaps most surprising, thing that he told me was: "Don't be controversial." Some may find that surprising coming from him. Anybody who says that things in Northern Ireland have not changed should take note.

The one thing that is clear to me is that this speech is a balancing act. I suppose that it is like one's first night out with a girl: one wants to do enough to impress but does not want to do too much and then get in trouble with her father—in this case, the Deputy Speaker or the leader of the party.

I wish my predecessor, Roy Beggs, well for the future. I have known Roy for many years; of course, he was originally a member of our party. He had an interest in education, and when I was a student I worked on some education issues with him. Then he left the Democratic Unionist party and joined the Ulster Unionist party. At that stage, the Ulster Unionist party had 10 Members of Parliament and my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim was the sole DUP Member. The parliamentary fortunes of the two parties are now reversed, although I am not saying that there is any link between that and Mr. Beggs going to the Ulster Unionist party. At the last election, my party increased its representation in this House by 50 per cent. and there is now one solitary Member of the Ulster Unionist party sitting in this House—the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I suppose that one could almost call her "Unionist Sinn Fein"—herself alone. I believe that that is a result of a sea change in the politics in Northern Ireland and people's reaction to those who were prepared to trust terrorists, to place them in Government and give them the benefit of the doubt, and then find, of course, that they did not live up to their promises.

Roy lives across the valley from me, so he is my neighbour. In fact, he is only a stone's throw away—I pick them out of the garden every morning. He is also a member of Larne council. I look forward to working with him over the next few years and wish him well in his retirement.

I am proud to represent East Antrim, a constituency that stretches for 60 miles from Newtonabbey on the edge of north Belfast right to the middle of the glens of Antrim and Carnlough. It has within its boundaries the historic town of Carrickfergus, with its magnificently restored castle, a modern marina that sits beside the castle and the old town centre contained within the original town walls.

The other major town in the constituency is Larne, which is the major land gateway to Northern Ireland and sits at the entrance to the renowned Antrim coast and glens. The town has been through a difficult period but has turned the corner and is attracting substantial new retail investment. It contains many sites with great investment potential because of their proximity to the port and the lough shore. One of the major difficulties for the town's development is the slowness of the planning process in Northern Ireland. As a public representative, I will be happy to get involved in addressing the problem, because it has held up much economic development that could have created jobs and improved the towns and the environment of Northern Ireland.

The coast road beyond Larne hugs the bottom of the steep cliffs of the Antrim plateau. Around each headland is a bay, which usually has a picturesque village and a glen running upwards to the Antrim plateau. Tourists can enjoy walking holidays there and the hospitality in small rural pubs and high-class restaurants and hotels. It is an unspoilt area of Northern Ireland. The two picturesque villages of Glenarm and Carnlough have great development potential. The secret and the challenge for everyone who is involved in developing that part of the coast is maintaining the quality of the built and the natural heritage while releasing the tourist potential of the area.

The constituency has a connection with this House, because on 14 June 1690, King William III landed his troops at Carrickfergus. The aim was to defeat King James, who was attempting to use Ireland as a base from which to regain the throne of England and undo the gains and achievements of the Glorious Revolution, which had eroded the tyranny of the king and strengthened the powers of this House. The defeat of King James followed at the battle of the Boyne 17 days later. That event is still celebrated in Northern Ireland on 12 July and is one of the most colourful and largest

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pageants in Europe. It brings in vast amounts of revenue in tourist income to Northern Ireland. Despite attempts by republicans who wish culturally to cleanse many things from Northern Ireland, the 12 July celebrations are still a major event.

Our relationship with Europe is one of the huge foreign policy issues about which we have heard today and that will face Parliament and our country in this Session. I welcome the commitment to a referendum on the EU constitution. Those who fought to free the House from the tyranny of the monarch in the past would be bewildered by the enthusiasm that some Members have displayed in their desire to hand over a wide range of powers from this House to the tyranny of a commission in Europe or European bureaucrats. The party to which I belong will oppose ratifying the intrusion of Europe into the House. We shall seek to ensure that the terms of the referendum are designed to provide a fair test of public opinion both through the wording of the question and the arrangements for its conduct. I firmly believe that the people of this country will not permit their country to become a sub-part of a European superstate or allow this mother of Parliaments to be reduced to a county council with a consultative role.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Kenneth Clarke) wondered whether we should have a referendum if the French turned down the European constitution in theirs. I did not understand his logic. He seemed to suggest that, if the French said no, we would not need a referendum, yet if the Dutch said no, we would need one. That sounded like double Dutch to me. He seemed to take an illogical view of the matter. I believe that the people of this country should have a say on whether we are absorbed into a European superstate. If the French put those who wish to enlarge the powers of Europe on to the canvas, it would be all the better to keep them down on the ground with another referendum. That is why, regardless of the outcome of the French referendum, there should also be one here.

I note that the Government have said that they will support the Iraqi Transitional Government. Having started the job in Iraq, it is important that we finish it. That means making a commitment in terms of troops, as the hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) said, and the continued involvement of our servicemen in that war zone. My party had reservations about the invasion of Iraq, but we supported the Government nevertheless. Hundreds of servicemen from Northern Ireland—from the Royal Irish Regiment and the Territorial Army—have served with distinction in Iraq, mainly in the Basra area. Although various Administrations in this House have treated us as though we were almost semi-detached from the rest of the United Kingdom, even to the point at which one Secretary of State publicly declared that the Government had no economic, strategic or political interest in Northern Ireland, the one thing that we can say about the citizens of Northern Ireland is that they have lived up to their obligations as citizens of the United Kingdom. They have given and served at times of national crisis.

Hundreds of members of the Royal Irish Regiment live in my constituency, and one of the blows that has hit them is that, while they were serving in Basra, the defence review recommended that the home battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment be disbanded, putting thousands of people on to the dole. There will always be a garrison in Northern Ireland—according to a previous Minister, it will contain about 5,500 men and women—and the cheapest option is to use locally based servicemen and women. The most efficient option is to use locally based members of the regiment who have a knowledge of the area. Given the way in which the services are stretched at the moment, it is nonsense to dispense with a locally based regiment and bring other regiments that are already overstretched into the Northern Ireland garrison. I hope that, when the defence review comes out in the autumn, there will be no mention of doing away with the home-based battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment, which has served honourably. Indeed, many of its members have been killed in the terrorist campaign.

Another important factor is that the Government not only look after the troops serving our country in foreign parts, but recognise their responsibility for those who suffer loss as a result of serving their country. A number of my constituents have suffered as a result of the cocktail of chemicals that they were given when they went out to fight in the Gulf war. Many of those people have been abandoned shamefully, and I hope that the Government will take on board the recommendations of the Lloyd inquiry and fulfil their obligations to the people who have suffered as a result of serving in previous conflicts in the middle east.

The defence of this country does not, of course, depend only on the actions of our armed forces. It also depends on the political decisions made by the Government. The Minister said this morning that one of the priorities would be tackling terrorism. It rings hollow with people in Northern Ireland when they hear that the Government intend to tackle international terrorism, while home-based terrorists are shown through the doors at Downing street to discuss the strategies that might be employed to get them into government in other parts of the United Kingdom. The Government need to take a consistent attitude towards terrorism. Home-based terrorism is as bad as international terrorism and those who have killed thousands in Northern Ireland should not be admitted to government in Northern Ireland.

I want devolution restored. Going from door to door in East Antrim, I have observed the frustration of people who feel that direct rule Ministers, however well intentioned they may be, do not reflect the views of people in Northern Ireland. There is, for instance, the question of our education system—an excellent education system based on merit and academic selection alone—which is now being attacked by a Government who, according to the Queen's Speech, will continue

"to improve quality and choice in the provision of schooling, and build on the progress already made to improve educational standards for all",

but at the same time, against the wishes of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, are destroying the excellent schools that we have there and wish to introduce comprehensive education.

That policy was, of course, started by the Education Minister who had total, unaccountable powers in the old Northern Ireland Assembly: Martin McGuinness, the Minister who thought that the three Rs were reading, writing and Armalites, and who went on to try

to destroy our education system. That policy has been followed through, although 62 per cent. of people in Northern Ireland expressed their opposition to it in the biggest consultation exercise to be carried out. Many other issues, such as the introduction of a double charge for both water and water rates, should be dealt with by a devolved Administration rather than by direct rule Ministers.

I hope that during this Parliament we shall see the restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim said yesterday, we will not accept it at any price. If the price of devolution for Northern Ireland is the inclusion of terrorists in government, that is not acceptable, and we will not move on. We cannot advance on that basis. If we did, the system would collapse with the first act of criminality or terrorism carried out by those who hang on to the coat-tails of Sinn Fein, to which they are inextricably linked.

I thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I trust that I shall have other opportunities to discuss issues of both local and national importance, and to reflect the views of the constituents who have overwhelmingly elected me to the House.

3.53 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (LD): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who has certainly enlivened our debate. He said at the outset that he had been given three bits of advice, and taking two out of three was not bad in the circumstances.

It was clear from some of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, particularly those about Europe, that we will not always agree with one another, but I do agree with what he said about the beauty of Antrim and his constituency. I was born in Dundonald, my family are from Donaghadee, and I still have many relatives in Northern Ireland. Last year I took my wife to Northern Ireland for her first visit. We experienced the delights of the Donaghadee lighthouse and toured around old haunts. It was a pleasure to take her to Antrim, although, after the rather dreich weather, she will have to hear the hon. Gentleman's tourism pitch before I can persuade her to go back.

It has been an interesting debate. The hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer), who is now not in his place, gave a careful analysis of the defence arena. I do not necessarily agree with everything that he said, as will become obvious, but like him I pay tribute to the quality of the speeches from those making their maiden contributions, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Rogerson). Like him, I pay tribute to his predecessor, Paul Tyler. I am delighted that he will soon, we hope, be in another place to continue his contribution to Parliament. The hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) made an early bid for a note in the Whips' notebook with some of his comments about the issues in the Government's programme about which he is concerned. Although I did not hear every part of it, as I nipped out of the Chamber briefly, the contribution by the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) illustrated that he will be a strong contributor to the House. I wish him and the others every success.

This is clearly not my maiden speech but, at the election, I discovered myself fighting a substantially altered seat in the Scottish borders. Just as right hon. and hon. Members had got the hang of Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, the boundary commission vandalised it all and I am now pleased to represent the seat of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, where I count among my important constituents the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram). I do not know whether he counts his home near Jedburgh as his first or second home, but he knows the area well and will understand why I regard it as a great privilege to be able to represent all Sir Archy Kirkwood's old seat, while retaining part of my old seat around Selkirkshire.

May I, in the manner of maiden speeches, pay tribute to Sir Archy, who, like Paul Tyler, will, I hope, soon be in another place? He was well respected in the House as a fair and impressive Chairman of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions over the previous two Parliaments. Behind the scenes, he was an important character in the House of Commons Commission and in many other aspects of Westminster life. He regularly says that he has been in this institution as a man and boy, for over 30 years. I am delighted that he will have the opportunity to continue to contribute to parliamentary life in the House of Lords in due course, and it is a great honour to be able to succeed him in his old seat.

The hon. Member for Newark took issue with some of the comments by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) about the situation in Iraq. I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's analysis, much of which I share. He is in danger of oversimplifying the situation as we have put it forward. We believe that now is the appropriate moment to make it clear what the exit strategy is to be in Iraq. We believe that the end of the United Nations authority under the existing resolution at the end of this year offers a clear target which we can aim for to begin a phased withdrawal from Iraq, but we accept that there are key issues to do with security there. As my right hon. and learned Friend made clear, we accept that there are severe difficulties in the provision of services in Iraq. The way people live day to day in that country is a terrible way to exist. Clearly, we have an ongoing responsibility to the country to ensure that those services and, above all, the security situation improve but, beyond all else, we must stop being part of the problem. We have not provided the solution that was expected or that was claimed would be provided. We must make it clear that we will do our bit to ensure that we develop that solution.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes) (Con): I heard the hon. Gentleman say that his policy, or that of his party, was to have a target of a phased withdrawal beginning at Christmas this year. Listening to his right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) earlier, I understood him to say "a phased withdrawal by" Christmas of 2005. One has an end date; the one that the hon. Gentleman has just announced could be as long as a piece of string. Perhaps he would clarify.

Mr. Moore: I have set out already, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman was listening very carefully, the

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fact that there are some key factors in determining what would be the appropriate moment, but we think that unless we make it clear that we support and will deliver a phased withdrawal of our troops, the continued insurgency and the growth in the strength of opposition to the coalition forces will get worse.

In the past few years we have witnessed a rapidly changing world, from a situation where the cold war dominated our military thinking to a situation that changed out of all recognition after the tragedy of 9/11. But in that period between the end of the cold war and 9/11 we had the terrible situation in Rwanda, and nearby, on our own European doorstep, in Bosnia. Our previous assumptions about the security situation in the world were turned on their head and the precariousness of our world security was illustrated in so many different ways.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) highlighted the ongoing difficulties in Afghanistan. In the past few weeks we have seen the focus shift to Uzbekistan, and we all now live in an era of greater uncertainty perhaps than at any stage in the past, complicated by the existence and growth of international terrorism and an increasing realisation that the number of failed states in the world is growing, with instability arising owing to scarce natural resources and the poverty from which many countries cannot escape.

Above all else, we are rightly concerned about the risks of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In recent years there has been a flurry of different responses from the Government reflecting those rapidly changing circumstances, with the strategic defence review, the new chapter, and the White Paper in December 2003, accompanied as it was by the Foreign Office's own White Paper, which highlighted among other things the need to ensure that the United Kingdom was safer from global terrorism and WMD, that we focused on an international system based on the rule of law, and that we created an effective European Union in a secure neighbourhood. The ongoing difficulties in the Balkans, in particular, emphasised the importance of that. We have been broadly supportive of that approach and shared the analysis, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife said earlier.

We have strong defence and armed forces in this country. That is partly as a legacy of our role in the world over the last century, and also in support of our important position at the United Nations, which places upon us special responsibilities. Collective security and the proper functioning of a system of international law are all vital to us and it is important that Britain plays its part in that, not least because British interests across the globe are substantial.

The current broad position of the defence forces in this country has always allowed us to be in a position to carry out expeditionary work across the world, and we support that, while recognising that stabilisation and a response to emergencies are growing features of demands on our armed forces. That requires a certain level of public expenditure and we broadly support the level committed to defence at present, but we do recognise that there is an ongoing need for reform and modernisation. We do, however, continue to question the reduction in the number of battalions in the Army and the misjudged abolition of the regiments, not least in Scotland. Nobody doubts the wisdom of strengthening the support and logistics for the Army or of reforming the arms plot, but we still question whether this is the time to be cutting back on the front line battalions, on the basis of big assumptions about the situation in Northern Ireland and the scale of our ongoing demands in Iraq. When we add to the mixture the extra demands placed on our armed forces for homeland security, that is surely something the Government should be rethinking.

As a plea for the regiments, I wish to make a local point to the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence. If we cannot persuade him to rethink his proposals, will he at least look again at the proposed name of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and Royal Scots Battalion within the new Royal Scottish Regiment? The proposed name has absolutely no support in the south of Scotland that I can find and has sought to keep both historic names without, I suspect, finding a solution that is acceptable to the Army or to those who support the traditions and regiments in localities such as those that I represent.

The United Kingdom rarely acts alone. A core assumption runs through defence White Papers and Government foreign policy that we will operate in coalitions informally or through alliances. We remain strong supporters of NATO. We also wish to see the development of the European security and defence policy. We do not believe that those are mutually contradictory or inconsistent; they ought to be complementary. We are encouraged to see the way in which European Union forces have begun to operate together in places such as Macedonia. We should not be choosing between those alliances but working with both.

One of this afternoon's themes has been the risk of proliferation. The hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) made a heartfelt plea, as he did during the previous Parliament, about the need to focus attention on the review conference for the non-proliferation treaty. This is a serious time for us, with concerns about the existence of nuclear weapons in India, Pakistan, Israel and elsewhere and with the threat that other countries, such as North Korea and Iran, might obtain the technology to enable them to create nuclear weapons.

We have a major responsibility at that conference, and as minds are concentrated on the difficulties in Iran and North Korea, we hope that all the existing nuclear powers will take the opportunity to lower the tension about the need for nuclear weapons, as some countries see it, and ensure that we make strong strides towards global disarmament. Without that, we run the risk of uncontrolled proliferation occurring.

We have supported the Government's efforts so far. I pay tribute to them for the disarmament that they have undertaken in recent years. We remain committed to a minimum United Kingdom nuclear deterrent, but we recognise that, as Ministers flagged up before the election, one of the big issues that we will face in this Parliament is the beginning of the debate about what might succeed the existing Trident missile system.

We are extremely well served by the men and women who make up our armed forces in this country. As we debate these matters in the House and take decisions

about what should happen in Britain's name and about committing the armed forces to conflict, as we did on Iraq, we must never lose sight of their bravery and professionalism and the debt that we owe them. Hon. Members on both sides of the House can agree that we are well served by them, and that it is important that we continue to have strong armed forces in this country.

4.9 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): We have had a very good debate this afternoon. We have heard four excellent maiden speeches so far, including those by the hon. Members for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) and for North Cornwall (Mr. Rogerson) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies).

We then heard an excellent maiden speech by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who represents one of the most beautiful parts of these islands. I am sure that he will be an excellent MP for his constituency, as he demonstrated this afternoon. However, I want to say a word about the success of his party in the general election. The success of the Democratic Unionist party, which is very much the largest party in Northern Ireland, places a great responsibility on its shoulders to deal with the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. Members on both sides agree with it that those who fail to renounce criminality should not be part of the process. That view is felt as much south of the border in Ireland as it is north of the border.

I am sorry that the leader of the DUP is not in his place, but I want to make a plea. For all the time that I have been in the House I have been a member, in various guises, of the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, which, sadly, has not had much representation from Northern Ireland in the past. It meets later this year for the first time in Northern Ireland—in Belfast, in November—and I hope that for the first time, we will include members of the DUP in the UK delegation to that body, which has taken forward much of the peace process in the past.

This debate is very much about foreign affairs and defence, and I want to talk about a subject that was little raised nationally in the general election. However, at one or two hustings meetings that took place in my constituency, the whole question of Europe, the referendum and the European constitutional treaty was certainly an issue. It is ironic that my UK Independence party opponent in the election described me on many occasions as fabulously pro-European. That was usually after I had explained to him why I opposed to the constitution. However, the new Minister for Europe in his opening speech would have described me as anti-European, because he lumped together anybody who opposed the constitution as anti-European. I do not know whether he included in that definition the 54 per cent of the French population who look as if they are about to reject the European constitution. To describe them as anti-European may be stretching it a little.

Whether or not I am simultaneously fabulously pro-European and anti-European, I will restate what I have said to the House on a number of occasions. I have been a great supporter of Britain's membership of the European Union ever since we joined 30 years ago, but I am seriously concerned that in that time, we have failed to take the people with us on the journey of the EU's development and evolution. We have now reached the stage at which most people in this country have little understanding of, and little confidence in, what is being done in their name in the European Union.

Euroscepticism is not unique to Britain. It exists throughout Europe, and the democratic deficit with regard to the EU seems to be worse in a number of other states where people feel that things are inevitable and that they can do nothing about them. However, the French and the Dutch have yet to speak in their referendums later this month. They will have an opportunity to send a message to the political elites of Europe, saying that the people would like an explanation of what is going on and what has been done in their names—in the past 30 years in this country, and for somewhat longer in a number of other member states.

For all the Minister for Europe's spin on the treaty, it does not provide the answer. When I read the Laeken declaration in 2001, I thought that we were beginning to go in the right direction and posing some of the right questions. However, when I read the English language version of the treaty—all 511 pages of it—I remembered one phrase from the Laeken declaration:

"Simplification of the Union's instruments".

There is no simplification in the constitution, and it contains so much detail that it can hardly be described as a constitution, but as a management textbook. Even the explanatory commentary that goes with it runs to 500 pages. If any of our citizens would like to buy the documents from The Stationery Office, the constitution itself costs £45 and the explanatory memorandum another £45. However, I somehow doubt whether they would be any the wiser after reading both documents.

The constitution is nowhere near being a simplifying treaty. It contains the minutiae of management detail that one would expect of those responsible for looking after our interests to come up with as their modus operandi, but it is not something to be put before the people in a referendum. Much of what is in the document could soon be out of date. What we now need is what the Laeken declaration referred to as

"the creation of European institutions that are closer to their citizens".

The constitutional treaty does create the provision for the Council of Ministers to make decisions in public. That would go some way towards making the institution more transparent and accountable. However, if one reads the documents and listens to those who understand the matter, one finds that decisions will be taken and votes will be held in public, but that the general proceedings of the Council will not be held in public. What is the point of that? It is rather like putting cameras in our Division Lobbies, but taking them out of the Chamber so that the public are not informed about the debate that goes on before a vote.

Most of our citizens support the broad aims of the Union, but they do not always see the connection between those goals and the everyday actions of the Union's institutions. We all know that Europe has changed and is changing. With the 10 new countries that joined last year, it now has 25 member states. Bulgaria and Romania are on track to become members. I hope

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that Croatia and Turkey will be there in the not too distant future. The enlarged Europe needs to be more effective and democratic, so we need a simple and transparent constitutional treaty, which is what the document that we shall consider was supposed to be.

An effective European Union is in Britain's interests. It is in our national interest to be a member of that Union because we have so many aims in common with other countries. However, we need a new treaty that spells out in black and white the powers of the various parties in the Union. It should state explicitly that the EU has only the powers that member states choose to grant it. It should clarify what the EU institutions can and cannot do.

The constitution is unacceptable, but that does not mean that I have become—in the words of the Minister for Europe—anti-European, that I do not want the European Union to succeed, or that I want us to be relegated to the position of Norway and Switzerland, with an expensive, subservient and passive relationship with the European Union. That is not an option for the British people. We need a tidying-up and simplifying treaty—but that is not what we have.

I can happily say that the leaders of Europe should face rejection in the forthcoming referendum, and the referendums in France and the Netherlands, and that they should go back and reconsider the constitutional treaty. I would support a treaty that made the EU more open and accountable. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (David Heathcoat-Amory) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) for their work on the Convention and their subsequent comments in the House and elsewhere. Neither of them favours the document and, despite their efforts, we have not got the treaty that we need. As we move towards a referendum on ratifying it, we should be clear that conveying a message to the leaders of Europe that the document is unacceptable in no way means that we are anti-European or that we do not want the European Union to succeed. I stress that we want it to succeed, and I certainly want it to succeed.

There is a danger of overreacting to the undoubted success of the UK Independence party in last year's European elections and its participation in the no campaign, but we have to make it clear in opposing this constitutional treaty that withdrawal is not an option, and that rejection of the treaty does not imply any such action.

The anti-Europeans often tout the examples of Norway or Switzerland as attractive alternatives. We must make it clear in the debate on the constitution that those alternatives are not acceptable to the British people. We must reject such a fantasy. To gain full access to the single market, Norway has to implement all the EU regulations that we have to implement, but with no say in the way in which those regulations are set. In fact, the Norwegians often refer to their country as a "fax" democracy because the laws by which they live arrive from Brussels on a fax machine. Switzerland is bound by the same laws, as are Iceland and Lichtenstein.

Recent figures from the European Commission, however, show that Norway has a better record of implementing EU regulations than we do. Indeed, it has a better record than 14 other member states of the Union. It has failed to implement only 0.7 per cent. of those EU regulations. The UK's failure rate is about 1.5 per cent. When it comes to gaining access to the single market—the most important aspect of the European Union—Norway must comply with the rules and regulations laid down in Brussels. So the option suggested by the UK Independence party for this country, whereby we would step back and adopt the same status as Norway or Switzerland, is totally unacceptable.

Do not let us forget also that both Norway and Switzerland must contribute to the EU budget. There is a myth about that as well. The Norwegians are committed to paying some €1.1 billion over the next five years. Last year, Switzerland agreed to pay €650 million over the same period. So that, too, is not an option.

I hope that it will become clear, as we approach the referendum that we are likely to get next year, that what the British people need and want, and what the peoples of Europe want, is a simplifying, tidying-up treaty—a short document that merely lays down the competences and makes the institutions and processes of the European Union both transparent and accountable. The constitution that the Government have negotiated, which will come before us and the British people, does not do that. It should be rejected by the people in a referendum. We should renegotiate it to bring about something much more in line with the Laeken declaration.

4.23 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con): I am delighted to participate in the debate, and I have heard some excellent speeches. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) made an admirable maiden speech.

We heard much in the Queen's Speech about the forthcoming presidency of the EU. As I am sure many hon. Members know, I take a great interest in the region of the Balkans. I want to ensure that the Government realise that that part of the world must be taken seriously in the coming months and during the presidency.

Let me start by considering the position with regard to Serbia. I might find myself a little lonely in this Parliament, having lost a good ally in the former Member for Halifax, Mrs. Alice Mahon. Although we were diametrically opposed on many issues, we both found ourselves speaking up for that part of the world. I ask any new Members who are interested to put their applications on a postcard to me. We are always keen to have new members of the all-party groups on those areas.

The problem with Serbia is that it has largely been ignored. After the bombing, we left the area and hoped that it would get better on its own. Unfortunately, that does not happen unless the EU puts action in place of words. There are many things that we can do, but the most important is to help the economy. The economy in Serbia is in a pretty poor state. Bad economic conditions inevitably lead to problems with dissatisfied populations. Over the past few years we have seen increasing radicalism and national identities coming to the fore, not necessarily in the most positive way. Unemployment is very high, too.

Ministers and Conservative spokesmen on international development have talked a lot about helping other countries, mainly with regard to Africa and Asia—but, incredibly, there are very serious problems in our own continent of Europe. In Serbia and elsewhere in the region, there are refugee camps for internally displaced people, which I have visited. That fact has been largely forgotten. We should bear in mind the fact that in years to come, it will be the EU that helps to solve the problems and heal the scars in that area—but that is some way off.

There are defence experts present who will probably be able to enlighten me about the current situation in Kosovo in their winding-up speeches, but from what I understand, it is far from good. A great deal of effort has been made, but it seems that there is an independent state—whether run by the EU or by NATO. It is because the solution to the problem is so difficult to find that nobody really wants to address the matter. I cannot say that I blame the Government; it is a huge problem—but it must be solved.

Some of us said at the time of the intervention that the current situation was inevitable. Everybody recognised at the time that what was done in Kosovo and Serbia—Yugoslavia, as it then was—was contrary to international law, but nobody kicked up too much of a fuss. In the light of the latter deployment in Iraq, I find it ironic that the Liberal Democrats, who have been keen on saying how they opposed war in Iraq—and they certainly did—were at the forefront of wanting to bomb the hell out of Serbia.

Sir Menzies Campbell: To characterise our position as saying that we wanted to bomb the hell out of Serbia is a grave injustice. There was an immediate humanitarian crisis in Kosovo. There is an emerging doctrine of international law that intervention may be justified in such circumstances. The Prime Minister expressed that in his Chicago speech, which the hon. Gentleman might find rewarding to read. That seems to us a perfectly legitimate basis on which to support Government action. They were not engaged in regime change. That is the difference between Kosovo and Iraq.

Mr. Randall: I bow to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's wisdom, but it has to be said that the precedent was set to allow action that was illegal under international law. He talks about humanitarian reasons for the action in Kosovo, but the Government could advance the same reasons for their action in Iraq, even though we were told that it was about weapons of mass destruction. It was most unfortunate that the action in Kosovo did not attract so much protest. I say that the Liberal Democrats were at the forefront of those calling for that action because, having sat here during the debates in which concerns were voiced by Labour and Conservative Members, I cannot recall hearing any Liberal Democrat speak against it. If I am wrong, I shall stand corrected, but I do not recall those of us who wanted to point out some of the things that were going on receiving any support from the Liberal Democrats.

Another lesson should have been learned from Kosovo. The Liberal Democrats talk about exit strategies, but I do not think that anybody had any idea about an exit strategy from Kosovo, or that anyone thought about the post-war reconstruction. We did not learn that lesson, and we have lived to rue it.

A slightly happier part of the region is Macedonia. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) talked about countries that hope to join the EU. Often when that subject is discussed Macedonia is not mentioned, yet Macedonia is making good progress toward joining the EU and has lots of things going for it. I believe that the Government's position is that they look forward to accepting Macedonia into the EU when it has met all the criteria. Macedonia has done a lot to solve some of its internal problems—like many Balkan countries, it has a diverse population—and I consider it a model of what can be achieved.

A positive step that the Government could take during their presidency of the EU—one that would enable them to show a bit of leadership—would be to try to ensure that the EU recognises Macedonia as the name of the country. It might surprise some hon. Members to learn that although we talk happily about Macedonia, officially it has to be referred to as "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". We know why that is: one of our fellow EU states—Greece—dislikes the idea of the country being called Macedonia. However, it is fair to say that Greece would not like to be referred to as "the former Ottoman domain of Greece", any more than my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth would like Wales to be referred to as "the former English colony of Wales". In today's EU, when Yugoslavia no longer exists, to call a country "a former Yugoslav Republic" is pretty demeaning.

In addition, during our EU presidency the Government should examine the position on visas. I find it incredible that Macedonian diplomats have to apply for visas to enter this country. If we cannot even acknowledge that Macedonia's diplomats should be able to come here without a visa, as do the diplomats of almost every other EU country, we are not sending the Macedonian people the right message about our willingness to welcome their country as a member of the European Union.

There are plenty of defence experts in the House, so I shall not dwell on the subject except to say that I believe that, sadly, the RAF will leave Uxbridge during the course of this Parliament. It has been there for nearly a century. When I first came to the House eight years ago I thought that that was a fight that I would have immediately, but it has taken eight years almost to come to fruition. I am sad, and all I can do at this stage is to pay tribute to the hundreds and thousands of servicemen and women who passed through RAF Uxbridge. The station has a place in our history as a centre from which the battle of Britain was conducted.

I had set my heart on speaking on environment matters tomorrow, but being a retailer by trade, if I see an opening in the market—I have not seen a great deal of support from Labour Members coming into the Chamber to say what a wonderful set of proposals have been made in the Queen's Speech—I am inclined to take it, and I thought that I might take the opportunity of speaking today. With only the tenuous link that this country's defence has often relied upon the fact that it is an island, I shall refer to marine law.

Over the past four years, despite the landlocked nature of Uxbridge, I have often found myself raising in this place the issue of the protection of the marine environment. Having introduced a private member's Bill on marine wildlife conservation in 2001, I was

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delighted to see the inclusion of a draft marine Bill—it was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech but it was included in the stuff that comes out afterwards that sets out all the exciting things that the Government are up to, and it will feature in the new legislative programme.

The likely provisions seem to be pretty good. I understand that the proposed legislation will streamline the planning system and the managing of activities in coastal marine waters. It will give new powers to protect important marine areas, species and habitats. It will improve the UK's capacity to plan and handle growth in offshore developments. That is all well and good. I am a little disappointed that the proposed legislation was not highlighted and flagged up more by the Government, because I think that all three major parties have made a commitment to such a Bill. If the Government are to bring it forward, I will say well done.

I mentioned better marine management during the debate on the 2003 Queen's Speech, and I said that waiting for it was rather like waiting for Godot. In a way we are still waiting, because the Bill will only be a draft. However, I am quite a fan of draft Bills because I think that they result in better legislation, and I hope that that approach is not an excuse to kick proposed legislation into the long grass—or perhaps seaweed. This much needed legislation should pass through the House as quickly as possible.

I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that not long before the end of the previous Parliament there was a large lobby from the Wildlife and Countryside Link in support of the proposed legislation. Many Members were visited by their constituents. I can see a glazed expression on the eyes of the occupants of the Treasury Bench, because this is not their area. That is fair. I am sure that there will be opportunities to raise the matter on other occasions, and it would be unfair of me to go on at length. If Ministers want to contact me later, I could enlighten them on some of the finer points of the legislation that I would like to see on the statute book. I hope that the Government will take me seriously, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your patience in allowing me to raise those matters.

4.38 pm

Mrs. Linda Riordan (Halifax) (Lab): I am proud to have been elected to serve as the Member for Halifax, which is my home town where I was born and educated. I am proud also to be part of an historic third term of a Labour Government.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Alice Mahon, who served Halifax as its MP for 18 years. That is an excellent example. I am sure that the House will agree that it is a tough act to follow. Alice was respected and highly regarded not just in Halifax but throughout the country and abroad. She was an extremely hard-working MP, and her life revolved around her commitment to our town. She played a major role in debates on Iraq.

During my campaign it was heartening to undertake an audit of the many achievements of Alice and the Labour Government since 1997. Our streets are safer and crime is down. There are now 66 more police officers fighting crime in Halifax and 237 more officers across west Yorkshire than in 1997. Unemployment is down by 53 per cent., and nearly 3,000 people have gained jobs, thanks to the new deal. In my constituency, the winter fuel allowance has warmed the homes of nearly 18,000 pensioners since February 2004. We are helping all pensioners to enjoy a decent and secure retirement. More than 5,000 pensioner households in Halifax now benefit from the pension credit, with a local award of nearly £39 a week.

In 1997, there was no guaranteed child care for parents. Now, 4,500 three and four-year-olds have received free part-time nursery education places from Calderdale local education authority. We have a new hospital that benefits Calderdale residents. As a non-executive director of the hospital trust for more than five years, I have had the pleasure of working with the talented staff of that hospital. There has been massive investment in new schools and others have been refurbished. There are more teachers, nurses and doctors, so we have a record to be proud of. As a councillor of many years' standing, I know that political initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty have transformed the lives of many of my constituents, both young and old. Such programmes include the Sure Start initiatives in north and west central Halifax.

Hard-working families have been helped enormously by tax credits. The Government's recognition that our streets need to be safer led to investment in street wardens and community support officers. Working closely with the police, they have helped to achieve safer, stronger communities. The press is often maligned with some justification, but I pay tribute to my local paper, the *Halifax Evening Courier*, which campaigned against binge drinking and yob culture long before it was fashionable to do so. During the campaign, I showed visiting Ministers, including Estelle Morris and my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), some of Halifax's hidden treasures. We visited the historic Shibden hall, which has been restored to its former glory with a Government grant. I put the Government on notice that I will lobby hard for a similar investment for the Piece Hall, a unique building in Halifax that truly deserves investment. That heritage attracts many tourists to Halifax and, apart from Liverpool, we have more listed buildings than any other area outside London. Clearly, one small local authority cannot find the resources to restore all those buildings to their former glory. We need help, and as the MP for Halifax, I will be pushing to receive it. We have a unique and wonderful department store in Halifax, which is the product of the vision of Roger and Sue Harvey, residents of the town.

In the campaign, transport, especially buses, was raised regularly with me on the doorstep. Since the deregulation of the buses, hilltops and isolated communities have often found themselves without any public transport. In the Gracious Speech there was a commitment to give more power to local government, and I hope that that includes public transport. As a committed trade unionist and Co-operative party member, I am pleased that my Government agreed not to implement the review of public sector pensions. Public sector workers often work for less money than people in the private sector simply because they believe that their pensions will be secure. To remove that incentive would further undermine the morale of part of the work force that has come in for unacceptable assault from those on the Opposition Front Benches.

I would also like to pay tribute to Kris Hopkins, the Conservative candidate for Halifax, who fought a good campaign on issues, not on personalities.

In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker, and with your permission, I cannot let this maiden speech pass without referring to the growing threat of the extreme right to our way of life. In my constituency, the British National party polled around 2,000 votes—5 per cent. of the total. In towns and cities across the north of England the menace is real and it is growing.

The Minister for Work, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge), wrote a most illuminating article for *The Observer* on 8 May, and I agree entirely with what she had to say. If Labour does not listen to its heartland voters it will lose them. If people feel neglected or ignored, or that the pace of change is too slow for them, they will turn elsewhere, attracted to the simplistic so-called policies of the hard right. Or they will simply go nowhere and drop out of the democratic process altogether.

On the steps of Downing street the day after the election, the Prime Minister said that he had listened. I do hope so, because we have also talked a lot about connecting with people and now we must act. As my right hon. Friend said in her article, strong, bold leadership is required and multiracial communities are here to stay, and thank goodness for that. People turn to extremists, not just out of racism, but also out of fear and frustration: frustration with us, the politicians. That is a challenge, if I may say so, for all who serve in this House. It is a challenge that I accept with honour and not a little humility.

4.46 pm

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Riordan) in what was an excellent maiden speech. She has certainly shown that she knows her constituency very well. I thank her for her generous remarks about Kris Hopkins, her Conservative opponent, whom I visited during the course of the campaign, when he showed me some splendid parts of her constituency. I also thought that it was politically astute of her in her maiden speech to praise her local newspaper. I am sure that that is a lesson that we can all learn from.

We have had a splendid crop of maiden speeches today. They have been some of the best that I have heard for a long time. The hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) was fluent and showed that he is a good salesman for his constituency, and I am sure that we will hear much more from him on that. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Rogerson) told us about the importance of ensuring that Cornish pasties are Cornish. I once visited a Cornish pasty factory in a neighbouring constituency, although I rather gave up when I was asked to taste an Indian curry Cornish pasty, an extension of pasties that I had not come across before. I just say gently to the hon. Gentleman—the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore) might like to pass this on to him—that although he mentioned his desire to see a Cornish assembly I think his party's policy was one of regionalisation, and the region in which Cornwall would have been was the same region as my constituency at the other end would have been in, namely the south-west. So unless he departs from party policy, I fear that his aspiration is unlikely to be met.

I listened with some nostalgia to the maiden speech of the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). His robust attitude brought back some happy memories of my four years in the Northern Ireland Office. He was sitting next to his leader, the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), who used to abjure me, saying "Minister, you are digging yourself a Sadducee's grave." When I asked him what a Sadducee's grave was, he said "'Tis a grave from which there is no resurrection." So I know that the hon. Member for South Antrim had to be careful in what he said today.

I should like to pay special tribute to the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies). It was an excellent speech: one of the best that I have heard. It had everything in it. He paid tribute, as I think both the Secretary of State and I would like to do, to the work done by the Territorial Army. Given its problems, it has served the country remarkably well in what it has been asked to do. He also showed a degree of passion which will serve him well in the future, and I look forward to many more contributions from him.

The debate has been wide-ranging. I did not expect to have this much time in which to speak. I do not know about the Secretary of State, but I do not intend to divide the time between now and 7 o'clock—I shall leave him the majority, if he wants it.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Kenneth Clarke) gave us his traditional tour d'horizon of the political scene. When, in his excellent critique of the Government's present standing, he called the Prime Minister "irretrievably damaged" and said that the Government are "weakened", Government Members did not respond with a single sign or sound of dissention. Perhaps his analysis is absolutely right.

I listened to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) with great attention. I am sorry that he is no longer a Front Bencher, because he did a great job at the Foreign Office. I know that he is disappointed, and I share his disappointment. He said that he is back in his natural habitat, but I think that his natural habitat is dealing with Africa, and I am sorry that I will not hear him discuss Africa from the Front Bench again. He said that in the hour in which he was the only elected Member of Parliament in this country—the count is conducted very quickly in Sunderland, South—he decided to form his own Government. He said that he had picked his Cabinet, but he refused to tell us their names—at some point, I hope that he succumbs to temptation and lets us know who was in his Cabinet.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) made a remarkable speech. He discussed India, and hon. Members should pay tribute to his work not only creating closer relations with our friends in India, but pointing out that we do not make enough of our opportunities in India. I share his desire to see that situation being remedied.

Once again, my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) gave us a clear analysis of the situation in Iraq, and I always listen to his remarks with a great deal of care and attention. He has a deep insight into the situation in Iraq, and his analysis was spot on.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore) represents some wonderful parts of the Scottish borders. I say that not only because I have a

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house in the area, but because 31 years ago I represented Berwickshire in this House for six short months, and I am sure that he will enjoy representing the constituency as much as I did. He is the new Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, and he said that their exit strategy from Iraq is one of planned withdrawal, beginning at Christmas. However, the Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), said that their policy is one of phased withdrawal, ending at Christmas. One of those phased withdrawals would end at Christmas this year; the other would start at Christmas this year. Once again, the Liberal Democrats have two policies in response to one problem.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) reminded us that being Eurosceptic is not the same as being anti-European and pointed out that other parts of Europe contain many Eurosceptics who are not anti-European. One of the false arguments in this country over the past few years has been that if one questions anything to do with the European project, one is anti-European. My hon. Friend is against the constitution and wants to return to the Laeken principles, and he indicated that the debate is too important for Government Front Benchers to continue to treat it peremptorily.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) reminded us of the problems in the Balkans. I do not know whether the Secretary of State will tell us what he thinks is happening in Kosovo, but yesterday's American newspapers contained some interesting suggestions on that point, and later in my speech I shall ask him about the possible implications for defence. However, we are all interested to know whether changes will be made in relation to Kosovo.

I should like to start my remarks about defence by paying heartfelt tribute to the commitment and dedication of our armed forces wherever they are deployed. They carry out on our behalf their difficult and often dangerous tasks with enormous courage and professionalism, and we thank them for what they do in our name. The death of Guardsman Wakefield reminded us very graphically of the sacrifices that we ask of our armed forces. I am sure that our thoughts and prayers are with his family and those who were his loved ones, and I hope that those thoughts and prayers will be passed on to them.

We hear more about some of our armed personnel than others. On my last visit to Afghanistan, I was told by a soldier that with the spotlight on Iraq they felt themselves to be the forgotten army. I am sure that the House will agree that they are not forgotten, and we must ensure that they never are.

I take this opportunity to welcome the Secretary of State for Defence to what I can only call his latest post on his ministerial merry-go-round; he seems to move Ministries as often as other people take holidays. I do not know how long we will have him in this post, but I wish him well and look forward to facing him across the Dispatch Box for many more weeks to come. More seriously, he was the principal architect of the 1998 strategic defence review and now has the unenviable task of reconciling today's reduced and overstretched force levels with the bold assumptions that were made in his SDR. I shall return to that later.

We are lucky to have the right hon. Gentleman with us today, as he has only just returned from a visit to Iraq. Rather more than that, in the past two months the sighting of a Defence Secretary has become almost as rare as seeing the abominable snowman. During the recent general election, not only was defence not mentioned by the Government, but we experienced what I can only call the syndrome of the invisible Hoon. I think that he was spotted for a moment in Rutland, although that has not yet been corroborated; certainly, he was not a leading player in the election. There was a rare moment of light when a leak suggested that the Government were planning the next generation of nuclear deterrent, but a left-wing squawk of protest soon put paid to that and we heard no more about it. The truth is that the greatest losers in the general election were our armed forces, who in many cases, outrageously, were not even able to cast a vote because the Government failed to make sure that they were registered in time to do so.

I fear that the Government's savage list of cuts, which we have pledged to reverse, will now be implemented. No service will be spared—the Royal Navy, the Army and the RAF will all feel the impact of the Government's axe. This is not happening in a static situation. Today, our soldiers are on operations around the world—notably, of course, in Iraq, where they are expected to remain for some considerable time. It is a matter of anger to me that having been assured time and again by the Government that there was a comprehensive post-war plan for Iraq, we now know that there was not. I condemned at the time the decision in which the Government were complicit to dismantle Iraq's own internal security apparatus—its army and police. That decision left a security vacuum that was readily filled by insurgency and by violence, and we are now paying a heavy price for that failure to plan in advance. Ironically, and far too late, we are now retraining and redeploying the same people whom we so casually dismissed when we dismantled those internal services.

We will also need to increase our commitment to Afghanistan to meet our forthcoming lead NATO role in ISAF—the international security assistance force. That confirms our commitment to Afghanistan's future; indeed, it also confirms our commitment to NATO as the pre-eminent military alliance and the cornerstone of our own security and defence.

Today's new strategic environment requires those deployments. We live in an increasingly unstable and uncertain world. Developed nations such as ourselves find that we are facing a new generation of threats. It has never been so important that we ensure that our armed forces—the main pillar of our nation's security and defence—are properly equipped, properly trained and thoroughly sustained in every way, yet this Government have failed our armed services in almost every significant respect. While committing our armed forces to five wars in eight years, they failed both in the strategic defence review of 1998 and the subsequent White Papers to close the ever-widening gap between military means and strategic ends. That capability gap is widening. With the last of the Sea Harriers taken out of service soon, the Royal Navy will have no close air

defence until 2015. The much vaunted and essential aircraft carriers look unlikely to enter service before today's carriers are withdrawn. The early withdrawal of the RAF Jaguars by 2007 will leave a similar capability gap before the ground attack version of the Typhoon enters full operational service at the end of the decade.

Now, at a time of increased threat, the Government plan to cut further our already overstretched and undermanned armed forces. The plan to take four front-line infantry battalions out of the line at a time when they have never been busier is utter folly. Surely the lessons from the operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and especially Iraq are that numbers—boots on the ground—matter, particularly infantry numbers. At a time of considerable terrorism at home and abroad and major military deployments overseas, what possible military logic or sense can there be in cutting infantry numbers?

I referred earlier to the Secretary of State's involvement in the strategic defence review. He must explain what has happened since 1998 to convince the Government not only to reverse the planned SDR increases but to introduce further cuts. The threat has not decreased—indeed, the opposite is true.

"Since SDR our Armed Forces have conducted operations which have been more complex and greater in number than we had envisaged. We have effectively been conducting continual concurrent operations, deploying further afield, to more places, more frequently and with a greater variety of missions than set out in the SDR planning assumptions. We expect to see a similar pattern of operations in future."

Those are not my words, but those of the Secretary of State's predecessor in the supporting essay that accompanied the December 2003 White Paper. He saw the commitments increasing, yet the capability is reducing. The Secretary of State must explain why that dangerous gap is being allowed to grow.

Why are there cuts? Is it because the security situation warrants a reduction in our military capability? That is clearly not the case, as the White Paper confirms. There can be and is only one explanation. The cuts are driven by a Chancellor who demands them—what the Chancellor demands, he gets, whatever the impact on our national security and armed forces. That is the test for the Secretary of State: is he brave enough to stand up to the Chancellor? Will he take urgent steps to fix that which his predecessor allowed so supinely to be broken?

The Government are taking six warships from the Royal Navy. That is a massive cut beyond what the SDR set out. Even in 1998, the Secretary of State considered that to be the absolute minimum required. At the bicentenary celebrations of Nelson's supreme victory at Trafalgar in July, we face the ignominy of the Royal Navy's presence being dwarfed by that of the French navy. That says something about the Government's defence policy.

The procurement programme is in crisis, too. The Government's record on defence procurement is lamentable. The sums wasted on cost overruns are staggering. Despite the launch of the smart procurement initiative in January 1998 under the mantra of "faster, cheaper, better", there has been little evidence of success. What is the Government's answer? Their answer is the appointment as Minister responsible for procurement of a man more versed in offshore tax havens and in receiving Government contracts than in placing them.

In the past eight years, the Government have overcommitted our forces while presiding over cuts, shrinkage and downsizing. Intervals between operational tours are well below the guideline figure of 24 months, with some people having as little as six months' respite between operations. The impact of that overstretch on individuals and their families, especially those in areas that are experiencing significant manning shortfalls, is an issue of extreme concern. I represent the military town of Tidworth and I have first-hand experience of the pressures that the Government's conduct of their defence policy creates.

The Government have the unqualified obligation to support our armed forces in the tasks that they ask them to perform. Yet the current gap between strategic ends and military means cannot be exaggerated. There are few indications that the objectives facing our armed forces are getting any easier.

I hope that the Secretary of State will now give us his latest assessment of the progress being made in the following theatres, all of which have been discussed in this debate. He has just returned from Iraq. We need a clear assessment of any progress that is being made in the genuine domestic stabilisation of that country which might allow us to consider drawing down our forces there. I also hope that he will tell us when that might start happening, if such stabilisation is occurring.

What is the current assessment of the security situation in the Balkans? What impact will the United States' plan to start negotiations with Serbia on the final status of Kosovo have on the future deployment of our troops there? Presumably there has been some contingency planning against that possibility, and I hope that the Secretary of State will give us some information on that today. Will he also give us the latest assessment of military and strategic progress in Afghanistan? Is there any truth in the speculation that the situation there is currently considered a strategic failure?

The British armed forces have a reputation for excellence and skill that is unrivalled throughout the world. They are the benchmark by which many other armed forces are judged. They have proved, time and again, to be the most adaptable and successful of flexible international forces. They have never let us down, but they currently feel totally let down and betrayed by this Government, who talk big yet deliver nothing but cuts in numbers, inadequate equipment, a lack of training and a callous insensitivity to the genuine concerns of those who serve us so well.

The Government face a number of major challenges over the lifetime of this Parliament. First, however uncomfortable it might be, they are going to have to address the future of the nuclear deterrent. I agree with the hon. Member for Sunderland, South when he said that he hoped that the discussions on that issue would take place in this House and not behind closed doors. I hope that the Secretary of State—who is listening to someone else at the moment—will take account of that. The point was raised by his hon. Friend, and I hope that he will give us an undertaking that there will be a full and open debate on the matter in the House of Commons. Will he also tell us whether a decision in principle was taken on the issue some time ago without being debated in the House? If so, I hope that he will arrange for a debate on that matter as soon as possible.

[Mr. Michael Ancram]

We shall also demand that the equipment programme match the needs of the armed forces, and we shall continue to scrutinise the operation of the Defence Procurement Agency. Britain's defence industry requires the implementation of the international traffic in arms regulations waiver—the ITAR waiver—which the Secretary of State's predecessor signally failed to secure from the American Congress. What plans does the Secretary of State have to persuade Congress that the waiver should be allowed to be implemented?

The continuing erosion of military ethos, arising from a misplaced obsession with human rights, must stop. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newark rightly said, the case of Trooper Williams is widely regarded as a disgrace, and we welcome the fact that the unjust case against him has now been dropped. We shall judge the proposed new military discipline legislation announced in the Gracious Speech against a benchmark of its effect on ethos and on the chain of command. We shall also monitor the misapplication of health and safety measures which threaten military preparedness.

I hope that the Secretary of State will start to give our armed forces the support and resources that they so badly need. They are supremely loyal to us, and it is time that the Government began to show them the same loyalty in return.

5.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): I approach the Dispatch Box this evening with a combination of pleasure and humility. I feel pleasure at being back at the Ministry of Defence and at being able to work with such fantastic people. I feel humility because I know that any contribution that I or any other Member of the House makes is nothing compared with the commitment, sacrifices, courage and occasional heroism of the hundreds of thousands of young men and women who serve in this country's armed forces. I am therefore greatly privileged to be in this position, and I intend to enjoy it—even the abuse from Members on the other side.

I started with a tribute because the respect and admiration for the British armed forces is an area on which we can all agree. It never ceases to amaze me that Her Majesty's armed forces can carry out such acts of determination, sacrifice and heroism in so many spheres of the world. That they can record hit videos at the same time is a measure of the quality of the British armed forces, and we welcome that.

I shall say more about the armed forces later. First, let me make it clear that any responsibility for the controversies, difficulties, differences, disputes and arguments that we experience in foreign policy should be laid where it is proper to lay it: on the Floor of the House, at the feet of the Government or on the desk of this Minister, and never on the backs of the young men and women in our armed forces. Given that they deny themselves the opportunity of participating publicly in such debates, it is our responsibility to ensure that whatever differences people may have with our armed forces, we make it absolutely plain that the responsibility for decisions to dispatch them to foreign fields, and occasionally to foreign wars, lies with this Government and this Minister—and I will fully accept that responsibility.

Let me now pay tribute to some who are present today, and to some who are not. First, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon), whose lengthy tenure displayed increasingly a degree of expertise, always a degree of commitment, and a huge degree of steadfastness under fire, almost to the extent of stoicism. I think that his example provides a lesson for us all. I congratulate him on his new post as Leader of the House, as opposed to leader of our defence effort, although I fear that he may not enjoy the period of rest and recreation to which he is fully entitled.

I also pay tribute to our dear departed hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), whose contribution as Opposition defence spokesman was enormous in every sense of the word. Obviously, taking over from him presents a voluminous challenge to the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), whose appointment I greatly welcome. I thank him for his generous offer not to share the remaining time with me—which has, however, deprived me of the common ministerial excuse that were it not for the shortage of time, all Members' points would be dealt with. I must also tell him, in the spirit of comradeship that normally marks these debates, that I do not think it is getting off to a good start, on the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar, to suggest that the French Navy is more capable than the Royal Navy—but perhaps that was a slip of the mind rather than an intentional statement from the Dispatch Box.

Although he is not present now—dealing, no doubt, with other weighty issues related to foreign affairs—I welcome the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) to his post as Opposition foreign affairs spokesman. It will be known in the House that he and I share an origin and background in Lanarkshire, and although he is not the first Fox to come out of the west of Scotland, he is by far the most celebrated.

I welcome the Minister for Europe, my right hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, South (Mr. Alexander), to his new position and to his status as a Cabinet colleague. I also welcome the new Liberal Democrat spokesman on foreign affairs, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore). I was amazed to learn today that one of his predecessors was the Conservative defence spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes. I did not know that he had spent some time representing that constituency. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk is thus a classic case of downward social mobility in terms of the representation of those in the area, but of course that does not detract from his status.

I was pleased to note that, in his first speech as foreign affairs spokesman, the hon. Gentleman seemed to have made—intentionally or otherwise—a very significant and sensible change in Liberal Democrat policy in Iraq. As the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes pointed out, the hon. Gentleman changed Liberal policy tonight—I notice that he is not taking the opportunity to deny it—from calling for the withdrawal of all British troops from Iraq by Christmas to calling for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq from Christmas

onwards, which seems to bring him into line with the policy of the Government. I congratulate him on his courage in overturning the position that was adopted by the person who is sitting two yards from him and who was until 30 seconds ago a close colleague of his in the Liberal party.

I turn to the debate, having carried out the courtesies and formalities; the fact that they are conventions does not mean that they are any less well meant. Debates on defence, to which I have returned after some years, are normally marked by a degree of quality, breadth and expertise on defence and foreign affairs matters that is not always matched in the other debates in the House. Today was no exception. The maiden speeches were of considerable merit and they certainly prefigure a continuation of substantial debates in the House.

We had maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) and for Halifax (Mrs. Riordan) and the hon. Members for North Cornwall (Mr. Rogerson), for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies). All showed that, although new to the House, they were not new to logic, thought or argument. They were of a sterling quality. I welcome those who made those contributions, some at the second attempt, including my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South. I am pleased that he has joined us.

In North Cornwall, we have a change of person but not of regime. In welcoming the new Member, we will want to remember the contribution of his predecessor, Paul Tyler. It will in no way diminish the hon. Member for East Antrim, whom I know, respect and like very much, which always helps in these matters, if I say that we will miss his predecessor. I know how close they were—a stone's throw apart, I think he said earlier, which just about sums it up. I spent many happy hours with Roy Beggs in my previous incarnation. I welcome, too, the hon. Member for Monmouth and his contribution, although of course I regret that Huw Edwards is not with us. He was a very good Member of the House whom all of us respected.

In welcoming our new colleague from Halifax, I pay tribute to her predecessor. I cannot say that we agreed on everything in defence matters—

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Or on anything.

John Reid: We agreed on some things, which may come as a surprise, not least to those on the Labour Benches. She was a fantastic advocate for her constituency and her beliefs and principles. Therefore, it is with respect that we remember the contribution that she made.

Substantial contributions have been made, too, by many returning Members. I will try to deal with some of the points that they raised out of respect for their passion and their insights. May I start with Kosovo, which was of considerable interest to Alice Mahon and which was raised by the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), among others? The international community has made it clear continually and again recently that Kosovo has to demonstrate its ability to meet expected standards of a civilised society across a range of areas before we can begin to address the issue of status. It is hoped that the United Nations review of standards in Kosovo will take place this summer. It is imminent and preparations are under way. A successful review of standards in Kosovo would enable the international community to address Kosovo's future status, so the first and most immediate issue on the agenda is to make that assessment of standards.

The remainder of 2005 will therefore be a challenging time in Kosovo and NATO must and will stand ready to meet any security challenges that arise out of that. The United Kingdom will play its full part in that, as normal, and through the provision of a small but effective UK contribution we can play a larger role in ensuring a safe and secure environment in Kosovo.

Mr. Ancram: I ask this very seriously. Today there was a report in an American newspaper that the State Department wants to make an announcement that negotiations are going to open with Serbia on the granting of independence to Kosovo. I wondered whether the right hon. Gentleman had anything to impart to us on that.

John Reid: The right hon. and learned Gentleman may not be surprised to know that I have not seen that report, because I was on a troop flight back from Iraq earlier today, just before I came to the House. I will check on that. I think that he mentioned negotiation. To my knowledge, I do not think that that has started. The sequence of events is as follows. The first thing to be done is to carry out the United Nations review and assessment of the standards in Kosovo itself; thereafter discussions will be widened. Whether or not preliminary talks are started and whether or not those are part of ongoing discussions between the United States or the United Nations elements in Serbia and Montenegro I do not know, but I will check on that and if he will permit me, I will write to him, because I am not in a position to comment on reports in the past few hours. What I am in a position to say is that, in Kosovo, NATO has continued to improve the flexibility and usability of troops since the violence there in March 2004. A lot of progress has been made, but all nations continue to press for further improvements. That is the present position.

I want to comment on a point made by the hon. Member for Uxbridge on the original intervention in Kosovo. I would not want to set a precedent that we continue to follow in protecting the Lib Dems against unfair criticism—or any criticism at all—but in this case he unfairly criticised the Lib Dems for what he regarded as an inconsistency between their support for intervention in Kosovo and their lack of support for intervention in Iraq. In fairness, we should recognise that there are several major grounds on which military intervention can take place. One is obviously self-defence and another is impending humanitarian catastrophe, which was the case in Kosovo. A third, of course, is United Nations Security Council resolutions. So I think what the hon. Gentleman said was unfair.

If I may be more helpful, if the hon. Gentleman really wanted to point out the glaring contradictions of the Lib Dem position he might compare, not Kosovo and Iraq, but Iraq 1998 with the last intervention in Iraq. Exactly the same legal grounds were used as a basis for military

[John Reid]

intervention in Iraq in 1998, and accepted and defended in, I think, both Houses of Parliament by the Liberals, as were later disputed by them in the recent intervention.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I am sure that the Secretary of State for Defence will give way.

John Reid: I am surprisingly asked to give way, and I will.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I welcome the Defence Secretary to his new position. He and I shared Opposition defence spokesmanships for a considerable time. I fear that he is doing us an injustice, no doubt inadvertently. If he remembers, in 1998 the reason that provoked military action was the fact that the inspectors were being denied access to a number of facilities. The military action that was taken was designed to destroy those facilities. It was taken over a period of some three days. It was entirely proportionate. It was a last resort because Saddam Hussein would not submit to any diplomatic initiative and it did not have as its objective regime change. Those are three very substantial differences in principle from the basis of the military action taken against Saddam Hussein in 2003, as we now know from the leaked minutes of the meeting held in July 2002.

John Reid: With great respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman—and I do have great respect for him—none of that holds water. Resolution 1441 was the last resolution demanding immediate, unconditional and full disclosure and acceptance of all the UN resolutions thus far, and its purpose was not regime change, but to respond to the breach of the UN resolutions, so the substance of the legal basis for the 1998 intervention and the latest intervention is exactly the same. What had changed in between was the Liberal party's view of the political landscape in this country, I am afraid to say. Although I credit him and his party with being consistent from the time when they last changed their position onwards, I am afraid that I cannot credit them with being consistent over the past period. Nevertheless, let us turn to the other points that were raised.

The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) referred to a multiplicity of questions arising from his and others' interest in India. On that question, I hope that he will forgive me if I refer him to the Foreign Office, and I have already briefly mentioned it to my colleague, the Minister for Europe. I hope that they will respond on those issues.

I will mention Iraq later in the context of my visit, but let me take some of the points that have been raised by the hon. Member for Woodspring, who speaks on foreign affairs for the Conservative party, by my hon. Friends the Members for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Halifax and by the right hon. and learned Members for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) and for Rushcliffe (Kenneth Clarke), among others.

As the House knows, the present position is that coalition forces are in Iraq under the terms of UN Security Council resolution 1546 and at the request of the Iraqi Government. The Minister for Defence in Iraq, al-Dulaimi, whom I met in the past 24 hours, is clear about the value of our presence—he reinforced and confirmed that to me—and the continued need for that presence for the time being.

The Government have a consistent position about our future plans: they should be based on conditions, not on a chronological sequence of events irrespective of the reality on the ground. We will stay no longer than necessary, and we will withdraw once Iraq has made sufficient progress, with our assistance, in building the capability of its own security forces to the point where they are able to deal with the security situation unaided.

I will return to several of those points later, when I briefly mention my visit to Iraq yesterday, but that is essentially the present position. There is no significant change, except that, of course, in Iraq itself, there has been a build-up of the Iraqi capability—Iraqisation, as it is sometimes called—to combat the insurgency and terrorism and to facilitate political developments and the appointment of Ministers to the Transitional Government, several of whom come from the Sunni community.

There has been great interest in the resources needed to sustain Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to the hon. Members whom I have mentioned already, that issue was raised by the hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer). We remain in close discussion with our coalition allies in Iraq about force levels. We are confident that the commitment to the coalition remains strong across a very wide number of participants. The withdrawal of the Dutch and their replacement by the Australians in our sector illustrates the flexibility of those arrangements. We will co-ordinate closely with our NATO allies to provide a UK contribution to help to expand the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

The claims of overstretch, which were repeated by the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes, are wide of the mark. Our future plans, to which he referred, are to rebalance the Army and to create expeditionary forces with a greater degree of flexibility, reach, speed and deployability, thus improving our ability not only to respond quickly, but to mount simultaneous campaigns.

Dr. Fox: The right hon. Gentleman said explicitly that troops would not be withdrawn from Iraq until the time was right or, in his earlier words, until the job was finished. For the sake of clarification, can he give the House the assurance that that will be done as a joint decision with the United States and that there is no possibility of American troops being withdrawn earlier, leaving British troops in place on their own?

John Reid: I am not aware of anybody suggesting that we should withdraw the United States forces from Iraq, thus leaving the 8,000 British forces there to cope. I am trying to understand the question. Certainly, as a generic response, I would say that we would not take any of these decisions without the fullest consultation with our allies, prime among them, of course, the United States, which is making a huge contribution not only to countering the present insurgency and terrorism in Iraq but to training forces. All that will be done, but we reserve the right, as does any sovereign nation, to make our own decisions ultimately; but we have always done that in the fullest consultation with our allies and will continue to do so.

The point applies not only to Iraq and Afghanistan, but to other areas of the world. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) raised the question of Darfur and whether more should be done to strengthen the United Nations mandate. We are putting pressure on all sides to try to find a peaceful resolution to this difficult and tragic crisis while, in the meantime, putting pressure on all sides to observe the ceasefire and their other commitments under it. The Government of Sudan and the Darfuri rebels must co-operate with African Union mediators so that there can be an early resumption of the Abuja peace talks. We therefore welcome the EU's decision to double the size of its monitoring mission. We have already provided in the order of £14 million to that mission and we are looking to see how we can assist its expansion, including through the possibility of NATO or EU help.

Another issue that was raised by several Members, including the foreign affairs spokesmen for the Liberals and the Conservatives, was the Chinese arms embargo. Of course, there are concerns about China, particularly about human rights, that do not need to be re-expressed in the House. The EU has agreed to review the embargo, and that review is ongoing. We believe that the embargo is an ineffective means of controlling arms sales to China and that the revised code of conduct would be more effective. However—and I stress this—no date has been set for a decision on lifting the embargo. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has previously made clear, China's recent anti-secessionist law has created a very difficult political environment in which to discuss these matters. I fully understand the concerns expressed not only by hon. Members in the House but by the United States, and I agree on the importance of maintaining security as a major factor in our consideration of the east Asia region.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post? As he is new to it, may I ask him to study the report of the Quadripartite Committee that was published just before the election? It refers specifically to China in some detail.

John Reid: I am aware of the report, but I cannot say that I have read it verbatim. However, on the advice of my hon. Friend, who, from our past discussions, I have always found wise on these matters, I shall return to it.

We will have big decisions to make quite apart from those on Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas of operational disposition of our troops. One was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Islington, North and for Sunderland, South, and they were visibly and helpfully assisted by the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes. I refer to Trident and the continuation of our nuclear deterrent. I think that we have been pretty open about that. The defence White Paper in 2003 indicated clearly that it was likely that decisions on whether to replace Trident would be needed during this Parliament and that we were taking steps to keep options open until a decision point was reached, and that continues to be the case.

It would be irresponsible of me to speculate from the Dispatch Box within days of arriving in my position about exactly what decisions might be needed, or exactly when they will be needed. However, I shall keep the House informed about the matter, as we have tried to do in the past. As I have been asked questions today, I confirm to the House that no decisions on any replacement have been taken in principle or otherwise. However, it is likely that such decisions will have to be taken during the course of this Parliament.

Mr. Mullin: Will my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that before any irreversible decisions are taken, proper discussions will take place in the House about the merits of a new generation of nuclear weapons?

John Reid: My hon. Friend has answered that question himself by raising the matter several times during today's debate. I have no doubt that a matter discussed in the first debate in the House will be raised continually. Obviously the Government will listen to hon. Members on both sides of the House before taking the decision that we are elected to make in the course of discharging our responsibilities. I do not think that I can be more specific than that because the decisions that must be taken and the exact time frame in which that must happen are not yet clear.

Mr. Mullin: I want to avoid the situation that occurred in the latter days of Mr. Callaghan's Government, when a decision was taken without most of the Cabinet or the House being informed. Labour Members discovered that a decision had been taken only when Tory Defence Ministers revealed some years later that a decision had been taken under the Callaghan Government. We do not want that to happen again, but I am sure that it will not, will it?

John Reid: Not if it is up to my hon. Friend or me. Without going into specifics, I can tell him that we do not regard the development of the Chevaline project as a role model for decision making by this Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his new appointment. He will no doubt have heard earlier contributions to the debate. I specifically raised the non-proliferation treaty conference in New York that is going on at present. Will he give us some indication of whether the UK Government's position is to support a reiteration that there should be no new nuclear weapons and the ultimate removal of all nuclear weapons, including those held by the five declared nuclear weapon states?

John Reid: Our policy has not changed on either of those issues. Of course we would all like a world in which there were no threats and thus no requirement to develop a response to threats. However, we live in a world in which there are such threats. I shall deal with this matter in detail at a later stage, but we must decide the best way of handling our response to them. We have tried to do that over the years and our policy remains exactly what it has been on nuclear weapons and deterrents, although of course we must deal with the changing nature of threats. I give my hon. Friend the assurance that I think he and his colleagues want: as the discussion develops, we will try to keep the House informed in a way that will satisfy hon. Members.

Sir Menzies Campbell: The Secretary of State will remember, as I do, endless debates provoked by the then

[Sir Menzies Campbell]

Conservative Government in an attempt to embarrass the Labour Opposition about whether the fourth Trident submarine should be constructed at Barrow-in-Furness. Those debates were, frankly, hopeless as a basis for discussing nuclear policy. He knows, too, that nuclear policy is arcane and sometimes pretty difficult to grasp. Will he give an undertaking that when allowing the House to reach what will be a significant decision, he will, without breaching secrets or anything of that kind, make as much professional information as possible available to hon. Members? Will he assure us that there will be no question of people scrambling to find information that is available to Ministers, but no one else?

John Reid: Let me say two things. First, the idea that a decision of that nature could be taken in all contexts without an open and continual discussion in this House and elsewhere, including the United States, is not realistic. I think that it will be open and continual. Of course, when it comes to nuclear deterrence and other matters relating to this country's security, it is not possible to put everything into the public domain. We have found from our experience over the past few years that when we try to do that and ensure that the sanctity of some of the information is retained, it is easy for people to accuse us of misrepresenting the information that is in the public domain. It is a continual challenge, but I think that the process will be much more open than people perhaps think.

Secondly, the great debate on the fourth Trident submarine and so on took place in an entirely different context. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife will remember that it took place in the context of a Labour party that was accused of having a defence policy that was basically "Surrender. Hands up." Those days are long gone, just as the days when Labour was regarded as a party of economic incompetence and the Tories were regarded as a party of economic competence and as strong on defence have gone.

We know what the contrast is now. We introduced a £3.7 billion increase in defence expenditure under my predecessor, now the Leader of the House. We know that we have reconfigured the British armed forces, with all their failings, in the strategic defence review, which was lauded internationally as well as here. We know that during the election there was no debate whatsoever on defence—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes can contain himself for a second while I finish.

People contrast that record with the 29 per cent. cut in real terms in defence expenditure that took place under the previous Government in the terrible days running up to 1997 and with the flip-flopping over Iraq, when the defence policy of the Leader of the Opposition appeared to be determined by him wetting his finger and sticking it in the air to see which way popular opinion was going. The whole context has changed. There is a degree of confidence in the Government's posture on defence. I can give a degree of confidence to my colleagues that we will, as part of a Government who are confident in our willingness and ability to defend our country, discuss such matters a little more openly than might otherwise have been the case.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will the Secretary of State give way?

John Reid: I will, but then I must make progress.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is kind of the Secretary of State to give way a second time.

In the context of what we have said about the non-proliferation treaty and my right hon. Friend's response to the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), will he confirm that there is no preparation at the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston for the construction of a facility to make any new nuclear weapons, free-fall bombs or anything similar, and that all decisions will be in the open before such construction work begins?

John Reid: My hon. Friend posits something that envisages a qualitative and quantifiable watershed between the maintenance of facilities, whereby they are updated and rendered continually safe so that our existing nuclear deterrent is made more effective, and a new weapon. The world does not work like that any more than one day we will have capitalism and the next we will have socialism, but my hon. Friend and I have argued about that as well. I do not think that the world develops like that.

The reality is that the preparations necessary to maintain a nuclear deterrent in a safe condition, which is constantly updated to meet new threats in terms of accuracy and new technology, are an integral part of what might become—I do not say will become—one possible avenue for one of the many alternatives that we might have to consider if are going to update, replace or modernise our nuclear deterrent. That is as honest an answer as I can give to my hon. Friend. In the real world, there is no such complete gap.

Talking of the real world, I have managed to deal with only three areas and I have been questioned on 15. If I may, I shall be much quicker in dealing with some of the others, but that does not mean that I do not regard them as major issues.

Mr. Alexander: Hear, hear.

John Reid: My right hon. Friend helpfully shouts "Hear, hear", as he has to pore over papers on, among other things, Uzbekistan—a serious issue, which has been raised in the debate.

The Government—and I am sure the whole House—are very concerned by what has happened in Uzbekistan. As a result, we are reviewing bilateral activities with the Uzbeks. Those are limited in scope and aimed at encouraging reform in the management of defence and at promoting higher professional standards. All export licences are assessed against European Union criteria. In the light of recent events, the Government have revised all licences to Uzbekistan, so that we are assured that they all conform to the criteria. Most are for dual-use equipment. I hope that the House is reassured by that.

The subject of Iran was raised by spokesmen for both Opposition parties. We will continue our effort to obtain guarantees that Iran's nuclear programme is explicitly for peaceful purposes. We have to continue that. We are committed to trying to make the E3 process a success. The Foreign Secretary has made it clear in talking about Iran that he can envisage

"no circumstances in which military action would be justified".—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2004; Vol. 426, c. 686.]

He said that such action would form no part of Government policy.

I hope that I have done justice to most of the points that have been raised—admittedly, at length. I thought that as the new Secretary of State for Defence I should reply as fully as possible in this first debate attempt from the Dispatch Box. Of course, there are wider issues of context in which such questions have been raised.

It is our job in government and in the House to assess and plan for the security challenges that we now face and will face in future. That goes to the heart of some of the points raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes. We believe that in the foreseeable future there is unlikely to be a resurgence of a conventional threat to the territory of the United Kingdom or of our allies. We say that with all the caveats that history places on that in reality, and with all our knowledge of the bland assumptions of the past that there would be no territorial threats of the sort which events—the terrible harbinger of difficulties—have thrown on us from the early years of the last century through to the Falklands in the 1980s.

That does not mean—and we must never be lulled into believing that it means—that the threats out there are any less dangerous or immediate. The threats to international peace and stability that have emerged since the end of the cold war are more asymmetric—in modern coinage—than that of one nation threatening the territorial sovereignty of another. However, they are no less immediate and serious. The threats and challenges posed by international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, particularly when unconstrained by any democratic control, by failed or failing states, or by what are sometimes called rogue states, each have the potential to damage global security and well-being and to threaten our security from afar. But in combination, the whole of the threat is even greater, much greater, than the sum of its parts.

That is not the world in which we have chosen to live, but the world that we inherited—a world that continues to change very rapidly. In 1997, as the hon. Member for Woodspring pointed out, we undertook the strategic defence review. I was privileged and proud to play a main role in directing the course of that review. We did that because of the rapidly changing world after the cold war. Since 1997, under previous Secretaries of State, we have constantly evaluated our ability to meet fast-evolving security challenges. That process began with the SDR, which has been followed by constant—almost permanent—revision and renewal as the world changes at a rate that has accelerated exponentially. Following the atrocities of 11 September 2001, our thinking evolved through the new chapter to the SDR. More recently, in December 2003, we published the defence White Paper, "Delivering Security in a Changing World", which broadly confirmed the rationale behind the SDR but suggested the need for even greater reach, speed of deployability and agility of response. The White Paper recognised that the opportunities to act to counter the threats we faced might be fleeting.

Bearing in mind the points made by some of my hon. Friends and by Liberal Democrat Members, let me say that of course we cannot solve all those problems by military means alone. There are some problems to which there are no solutions, and some to which there are no exclusively military solutions. Whatever we think about the efficacy of our armed forces, we recognise that the potential and, if necessary, actual disposition of military fighting power is rarely a sufficient condition to address the challenges that face us. However, it is often a necessary condition, and not only in counter-terrorism: the capabilities of our armed forces are equally important in responding to humanitarian crises. Our ability to put fighting power in the field is both necessary and sufficient to meet some challenges, but it is not sufficient to meet others and we need to deploy the whole gamut of diplomatic, financial and legal mechanisms as well as military means.

In the modern, interdependent world, we can rarely go it alone. We need both better cross-departmental working inside Government in our internal affairs and better international working in our external affairs. That, among other reasons, is why the United Kingdom remains wholly committed to working through international organisations such as the G8, the United Nations, NATO, the EU and—let me reassure the hon. Member for Woodspring—the Commonwealth, which remains a potent vehicle for tackling challenges both specific and general. We are committed to working through all those organisations to develop effective collective responses to global security challenges. We shall use our presidency of the G8 and of the EU to advance our higher priorities, which include tackling poverty in Africa and climate change as well as the other issues mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe when he opened the debate. We do that because it is in our self-interest and because it is our responsibility as citizens of the wider world to promote international stability and development.

I look forward to playing my part in the multinational forums in which defence has a prominent profile. In that context, let me restate that NATO is the cornerstone of our collective security—a point recognised in the EU treaty—and that the UK will continue to play a full and, wherever possible, leading role in that alliance. This will include continuing to modernise and transform NATO to face its new 21st century challenges.

I am delighted that one of the decisions that we took in the strategic defence review, which was implemented by my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Defence, was the purchase of the C-17, or rather the leasing of the C-17 heavy and very large aircraft for strategic lift. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether praise is being showered upon me from a sedentary position by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell). However, I am convinced that it is one of the best decisions that we have taken in recent years. That has been confirmed by my recent discussions with servicemen and women in the RAF, who assure me that it was an important and huge step forward in our strategic lift capability.

[John Reid]

In that way we enhanced not only ourselves but also the European powers, by making it possible for us to operate strategic lift where previously we were not able to do so. In the EU, we will work to build up the European security and defence policy as part of the common foreign and security policy.

Our aims during the United Kingdom's presidency of the EU are to continue the agenda that will see the European security and defence policy become more capable, more coherent and more active. All the while we must ensure that the process is compatible with NATO's security structures and thus avoid unnecessary duplication of waste. We must also ensure that we play to the EU's strengths, such as the breadth of non-military tools that it can bring to bear in emerging or continuing international crises.

Our armed forces are making a strong contribution to international stability in conjunction with the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. As a force for good, our armed forces are called upon to perform a huge range of tasks around the globe. We have dealt with only the most obvious examples in Iraq, Afghanistan and so on. I am extremely proud, as I am sure we all are, of the part that our armed forces played in bringing about the right conditions for the recent successful elections in Iraq. It was an historic occasion. Despite the threat not only of terrorism but of death, in many cases the turnout was just under 60 per cent. It was not hugely different from the turnout in both of our most recent elections in this country. That is testimony first to the courage of the people of Iraq, and secondly to the role that the multinational forces are playing. As I have met for the first time Iraqi forces in the build-up of their 10th division, I pay tribute to the effective role that they played in protecting the people going to polling booths in Iraq.

The success of those security measures on the day was possible only because of the hard work of the Iraqi security forces and the supporting roles played by coalition forces. The violence of the past few weeks presents us with a huge challenge, but it should not be allowed to overshadow the enormity of the step towards a free and democratic Iraq.

As the right hon. and learned Member for Devizes mentioned, I returned this morning from visiting Iraq. I am refreshed and once again astounded by the commitment of that country's own young men and women in the armed forces. I am pleased that the Iraqis are building up their own strength to enable them gradually to take over leadership in the provinces throughout their country. More than 165,000 Iraqi personnel have now been trained and equipped by the coalition. For the first time, that number is more than the number of personnel trained by the multinational forces.

We are committed to Iraq for as long as the Iraqi Government judge that necessary. Progress towards withdrawal will depend on achieving certain conditions, as the Iraqi forces become more and more able to take on a full range of security tasks. That will be the arbiter and the benchmark of our decision-making process, which will not be confined to a set of preordained time scales.

I met the 10th division in Basra. I also met the new Iraqi Defence Minister, Mr. al-Dulaimi, who is a Sunni, part of the minority population of Iraq. He was appointed Defence Minister on the same day as I was appointed Secretary of State for Defence. He has probably already suffered just as many attacks and criticisms as I have in that short period. However, I know that he is fully committed to ensuring the peace and stability of his country, and he is a Sunni who is committed to working for all of the people of Iraq who want to offer a better future for all the people there.

I met General Casey, the four-star US general in charge of the strategic direction of the multinational force, who was generous with his praise not only for the British armed forces but for the work of civilian staff in the reconstruction effort and for the leadership role played by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield in that effort.

In Iraq, we remain committed to assisting the new Government in stabilising the country. *[Interruption.]* The usual complaint from the Opposition is that I do not answer in detail all the points that they have made. It is refreshing, if annoying, to be criticised for doing the opposite today In conjunction with officials from the Department for International Development, British armed forces have supported the reconstruction of the country's dilapidated infrastructure. That is a genuine problem, and it is essential that progress on maintaining security in Iraq is accompanied by political, social and economic development. The Iraqis are making progress in all areas, but they need our help.

In Afghanistan NATO, as well as the international coalition, is playing its part in bringing security to the more remote areas. I have already dealt with issues arising from that, so I shall mention some of the other areas in which our forces are playing a vital role, including the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa. Our commitment to the task in the Balkans is demonstrated by the current UK leadership of the EU force that took over command from NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2004.

The House has previously discussed our ambitious modernisation programme, as set out in the future capabilities paper published last year. Given the time available, I shall not go into that programme in detail, and will merely point out that the Opposition's pervasive assumption that bigger is better and smaller is worse is not a working assumption for the chiefs of staff, the military or, indeed, myself. Many changes have been introduced, including new equipment and capability.

Mr. Ancram: Is the Secretary of State saying that the chiefs of staff agree with the number of men proposed at the moment? I seem to recall that General Sir Mike Jackson said that he could do with a lot more men.

John Reid: In an ideal world we would have bigger and better—

Mr. Ancram *indicated assent.*

John Reid: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is nodding at that statement, as if it verified the wisdom of his belief. Agreeing with oneself is the norm in the House, but that does not necessarily make something

true. Of course, instead of two 20,000-tonne aircraft carriers there is a desire to have two 60,000-tonne carriers. We have heard such requests. People want five aircraft carriers, twice as many troops and 300 Eurofighters.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): What about ships?

John Reid: In the past 20 to 25 years, we have had two through-deck cruisers, which are smaller 20,000-tonne aircraft carriers. The Government have committed themselves to two 60,000-tonne aircraft carriers by 2012. We are committed to that forward programme. Nothing like that was ordered under the previous Government. We have ordered the one of the best combat aircraft in the world, the Typhoon, previously the Eurofighter, which is second only to an American model. We have introduced an immense range of equipment and capital expenditure. Of course, we must try to balance that with the number of personnel, but the Opposition should not consider that the reconfiguration of the infantry division is merely a way of cutting numbers. It is not—it is a thorough reorganisation in which we have got rid of the arms plot and all the inefficiencies involved in training people for six months to a year, giving them two years in a particular role, then retraining them. I can assure the Opposition that that has been warmly welcomed not only by General Jackson and the chiefs of staff but by the infantrymen and women whom I met in the past 48 hours. It is a long overdue modernisation and reform of infantry battalions.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Is it not also correct that General Jackson has put in place and supports not only the arms plot but the efficiency measures to which my right hon. Friend has just referred, none of which steps were taken during the 18 years of Conservative Government? Is it not also a fact that communities such as the north-east will benefit from the biggest shipbuilding programme in this country's history, which contrasts with the record of the Conservative Government, who closed down shipbuilding in the north-east?

John Reid: Both those points are true. I stand second to no one in my respect for General Jackson and the other chiefs of staff. The decisions were taken by Ministers and I fully accept responsibility for that, and for implementing them. But I make it plain that, in terms of the advice that we received about the reconfiguration of the infantry battalions and modernising them so that we did not incorporate within a severely pressed defence budget—*[Interruption.]* It is hugely bigger and increasing, compared with the budget under the Conservatives, which was hugely smaller and being cut by 29 per cent.—but it is still a hard-pressed budget. I accept that, and we had to take some difficult decisions, but they were for the benefit of the capability of fighting power that can be achieved with the money and the people that we have.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

John Reid: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, provided that he does not then complain from a sedentary position that I am going on too long.

Mr. Howarth: I am delighted to assure the Secretary of State that I shall not complain about his answering the questions put by my right hon. and hon. Friends, but let me put this question to him. He has asserted that the chiefs of staff are happy, yet he himself set out in the strategic defence review that there should be 32 surface vessels. The Government are now proposing to reduce those to 25. I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman talk to Sir Alan West, the First Sea Lord, and see what he thinks about that reduction, because he has said that it puts him in a difficult position and he wants to know which tasks he will have to forgo in order to meet his tasks with a substantially reduced surface fleet.

John Reid: It will come as no surprise that I do speak to the First Sea Lord—*[Interruption.]*—Alan West. Yes, I know his name. I knew him when he was Chief of Defence Intelligence, and before that. I dare say that I know him better than the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) does. I am glad to see him agreeing with that. He made the not startlingly surprising assertion that one cannot be in two places at the same time, and nor can a ship be in two places at the same time. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) is saying that hard decisions had to be made, even within an increasing defence budget, and that is absolutely correct. But what I am saying is that there may be people in here, although I do not know who they are, who can criticise me from a position of advocacy of a hugely increased defence budget, but it is not the hon. Gentleman or his colleagues. First of all, they slashed the budget by 30 per cent. in real terms in the 10 years before Labour came to power. I may not hold him personally responsible, but he supported the Government. Incidentally, some of that happened during his period as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the admirable Lady Thatcher, who talked a good game, and cut Britain's defence budget as no one ever had before. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I have told her that to her face, as well as in the House.

I did not notice a Conservative party manifesto pledge hugely to increase the budget. Not only did it not promise to increase the budget, but at best it said that it would freeze it in real terms—

Mr. Ancram: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Reid: Just a minute, I have not finished with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I have one or two more kicks before he gets up. Not only did the Conservative manifesto on foreign affairs and defence not provide any real solace to servicemen and women; it did not mention Burma—an omission that was complained about today—and for the first time in 50 years it did not contain the words "the United States of America". How one can write a manifesto on foreign and defence affairs without even mentioning our biggest ally and the most powerful nation in the world in military terms is beyond me, but perhaps the right hon. and learned Gentleman, new to his post, will explain all the faults of his predecessor in writing it.

Mr. Ancram: I am all for having an argument with the Secretary of State, but we must base it on accurate facts rather than fiction. Our manifesto stated that we would increase the defence budget by £2.7 billion more than the Government's proposal. If that is not an increase, I do not know what is.

John Reid: The Conservatives said that they would make £1.8 billion of efficiency savings, but nobody believed that they could take £1.8 billion out of the Ministry of Defence by saving paper clips and making sure that staff used one pen rather than two per fortnight. At best, they would have frozen defence expenditure, and they would probably have cut it. *[Interruption.]* No one should be surprised, because that is exactly what they did when they were in government. Let us conduct this argument on the back of a series of empirically based and historically verifiable facts—we have increased defence expenditure in real terms; they cut it by 29 per cent. over a 10-year period.

Personnel suffer most when defence expenditure is cut. One can train and educate forces and one can buy aircraft carriers, ships and planes, but the third element of fighting power, people and their morale, which concerns leadership, bonding, traditions, commitment and determination, is at the core of defence. Accordingly, we have made a large investment in welfare. When we deal with great geo-strategic issues in this House, little matters do not seem to bear much discussion, but access to telephones and telephone cards, deliveries of letters, receiving British Forces Broadcasting and Sky and watching the latest films and videos mean a lot to people if they are in a camp in the middle of a desert on a dark night.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister of State on his emphasis on welfare, and personnel in Basra, Baghdad and elsewhere made that point to me as recently as 24 hours ago. Welfare services help to make a very difficult life tolerable, which is why the new pension and compensation schemes include greatly improved death benefits and widow's benefits. The MoD has recently announced that the service group life assurance scheme will offer the armed forces insurance without exclusions at premiums comparable to those offered by civilian schemes. As one supermarket says, "every little helps", and all those little things add up to make a huge difference to the welfare of soldiers, sailors and airmen.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Although I accept that advances have been made in welfare provision, will the Secretary of State make a commitment to respond urgently to the Defence Committee report on the training regime? The report raises many concerns and contains many recommendations, which are a matter of ongoing concern for families involved in events at Deepcut and others. An early response would help not only the Committee but young people, who should be confident if they join the armed services.

John Reid: I assure my hon. Friend that we will respond to that helpful document within the time frame.

In the course of this Parliament, we are also committed to modernising legislation on discipline in our armed forces. We will introduce an armed forces Bill to bring together all such measures in the armed forces, which is something that should have been done at some point in the past few decades.

I hope that we have raised the profile and importance of our veterans through the schemes and initiatives that we have introduced for them—no veterans units existed before I set one up in 1997.

Rather than spending my time reading papers at my desk, I have gone to the most important location in the armed services in the course of the past week, which is with the men and women who serve this country, and I pay tribute to them. Whether it is the men and women on HMS Illustrious, who are north of Scotland en route to other tasks after the ship's refurbishment, whether it is 101 Squadron, which is carrying out air transport and air refuelling, whether it is those who pilot our C-17s, whether it is those involved in pilot training at Brize Norton or whether it is our servicemen and women in the Gulf, my admiration for how they conduct tasks set by this Government and this Parliament is undiminished.

In drawing the debate to a close, it is right that we should focus on those people's exceptional contribution. They have served their country with courage and dedication over the past year, most obviously in the areas that we have mentioned in Iraq, but also in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, in west Africa—in Sierra Leone—in Northern Ireland, in the Falkland Islands, in Cyprus, and in response to the south-east Asia tsunami. I am proud to be associated with them, and I thank the Government for the opportunity to be so again. I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending them our thanks and best wishes for the future.

Debate adjourned.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Wild Flowers

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

6.15 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I congratulate the new Minister on his appointment and welcome him to the Dispatch Box for the first time. I hope that he enjoys his time as Minister. He has a very responsible position, and I have confidence that he will deliver; I certainly hope that he will do so in relation to what I shall propose tonight.

Where have all the flowers gone? In the case of Britain's wild flowers, one in five species is on the brink of extinction—345 out of a total of 1,756. That is an appalling indictment of those who have allowed this environmental doomsday to occur. The 20th century—the most destructive 100 years since man first walked on earth—was a disaster for our indigenous wild flowers, with more than 97 per cent. of the nation's wild flower meadows lost since 1945. As we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the second world war in Europe, let us reflect that today Britain's wild flower landscape from that time has changed beyond all recognition. There are several reasons for that: the continuing urbanisation of the countryside; changes in agricultural practices, not just the use of chemicals, pesticides and fertilisers, although those are major causes; contradictory farming policy directives from successive Governments and from the European Union; and climate change.

Last week, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee published "The Vascular Plant Red Data List for Great Britain", which was the result of a two-year investigation by a working group comprising 10 of the UK's leading botanists and outlining the current dire position. That should not have come as a real surprise, for 20 years ago Nature Conservation in Britain reported that 97 per cent. of the nation's traditional wild flower meadows which existed in 1945 had been destroyed or degraded.

The position in my home county of Essex is even worse. According to the Essex phase 1 survey published in the early 1990s, 99 per cent. of the wild flower meadows had been destroyed or degraded. I shall turn later to what is happening in Essex, in order to report bad news involving the Government which will destroy some of the remaining 1 per cent., but also encouraging news from my home town of Colchester, where the borough council has reversed the trend and introduced wild flower areas.

First, however, the national picture. Those who researched and compiled the red data list come from English Nature, the Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, the Botanical Society of the British Isles, Plantlife, the Natural History museum, and the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. They and the 1,000 volunteers—members of the Botanical Society of the British Isles—who undertook the two-year surveillance are to be commended for the quality of their research and to be thanked for drawing attention to the deteriorating situation.

Government have a responsibility to act, and to act quickly and positively, to halt the decline, and to take measures that will see not only token pockets of wild flowers but their widespread restoration as an integral feature of our landscape that past generations enjoyed and bequeathed to us. We have a responsibility to pass on our colourful natural heritage to future generations.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee tells me:

> "The new Red Data List highlights the fact that 345 British vascular plants—approximately one in five of the British flora—are under threat, while a further 98 are"—

to use the committee's phrase—"near threatened." The committee states that a relatively large number of widespread and often well known species appear on the red list for the first time. They include plants that are the habitat of, for example, the skylark and house sparrow, which have undergone severe population decline.

One of the plants at risk of extinction is the corn buttercup, which is traditionally found in corn and bean fields throughout England. It is now limited to Oxfordshire, Norfolk, Essex, Surrey and Lincolnshire. There has been an 81 per cent. decline since 1987. The red data list concludes that it is "critically endangered".

Another wild flower at risk is the purple milk-vetch. It is still found in sand dunes along the east coast from Scotland to Lincolnshire and East Anglia, but it has disappeared from fertilised grass lands. That plant is listed as "endangered", while the night-flowering catchfly, which is found on arable land in Norfolk and Suffolk, is listed as "vulnerable to extinction". All have suffered huge decline in the past 20 years. The roll call of plants on the red list and detailed according to internationally recognised criteria are placed in categories of "critically endangered", "endangered" and "vulnerable to extinction". I presume that the Under-Secretary has the complete copy.

All who love our countryside want to hear today what action the Government will take in the light of the environmental doomsday account that has been brought to their attention. I welcome the following promise in the Gracious Speech:

> "Legislation will be brought forward to ensure the better management and protection of the natural environment".

But action is needed now, in advance of the legislation. Will the Under-Secretary state whether positive action will emerge from the review of the Government's biodiversity action plan, which, I understand, is to take place shortly?

The Under-Secretary could make an immediate start by having words with the Deputy Prime Minister, whose office currently proposes the construction of something like 1,600 homes on several sensitive meadows, which the Government own, at Langdon Hills, Basildon. They contain rare plant species such as green-veined orchids, adder's-tongue fern and hay rattle. The meadows constitute a valuable complex that should not be destroyed, especially in the light of the red list's alarming report and the fact that Essex has already lost more wild flower meadows than the national percentage.

It is not my place to articulate the local arguments to save the area from development, but I mention this briefly as an example of the way in which the Government are aiding and abetting the destruction of yet more of our declining number of wild flower meadows. I shall not stray into the Stansted airport debate, but doubtless those who wish to save our wild flower meadows will examine that.

[Bob Russell]

To stick to Essex, I am grateful to Mr. Andrew May, conservation manager for the Essex Wildlife Trust—a fantastic organisation—who tells me:

"The future of Essex wild flowers is on a knife-edge. The wildlife areas that remain are often too small and isolated to survive in the long term.

Within Essex, the last 50 years have seen the loss of 99 per cent. of flower-rich meadows, 82 per cent. of grazing marsh, 50 per cent. of hedgerows and 24 per cent. of ancient woodlands.

Many species of insects, especially butterflies and moths, depend on flower-rich grasslands. Results of other recent analysis are alarming with butterfly species, native birds and native plants declined by 71 per cent., 54 per cent. and 28 per cent. respectively in the last 20 years.

Plant after plant is becoming extinct as a result of changing farming methods, and as industry, housing, new roads, inappropriate management and planting schemes, gravel extraction, landfill and leisure activities all expanded to take up precious space."

Clearly, Essex needs to do much to retrieve the situation. I hope that the debate this evening will galvanise the county into action before it is too late.

I understand that the Bill that the Government plan to introduce will create a single organisation—Natural England—combining English Nature, parts of the Countryside Agency and most of the Rural Development Service. When does the Under-Secretary expect the new agency to be established? Will its remit include not only the protection of existing wild flower habitats but also, as part of its mission statement, the development of new areas of wild flower meadows and reserves?

Perhaps the Minister will reflect on the words of Dr. Trevor Dines of the wild flower conservation charity, Plantlife, who is one of the authors of the red data list survey. He said:

"We had no idea that some of these declines were as bad as they are and we were very shocked to discover them."

Dr. Chris Cheffings, the plants advisor to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, was quoted in an article in *The Times* by its countryside editor Valerie Elliott. She said:

"My parents' farm was one of the last sites in Lincolnshire for corn buttercups; alas, that has all gone. I grew up seeing purple milk-vetch on the roadsides; this is now, by and large, gone."

Dr. Cheffings said that she found it shocking that so many species were on the red list.

Mr. Michael McCarthy, the environment editor of *The Independent*, wrote a by-lined article on 9 May, under the headline:

"How chemicals altered balance between farming and natural world".

The article concluded:

"The fields still look green when you go for your country walk; but often, green is all they look, and the wonderful pattern of colour they once exhibited is no longer to be seen."

In a second article by Mr. McCarthy, entitled

"Botanists shocked by scale of wild flower decline",

he said of the red list:

"The findings mean that priorities for conserving Britain's wild flowers in future will need to be reordered, with more concern for commonplace plants in the fields of the wider countryside outside protected areas—the ones that are really at risk."

Does the Minister concur with that conclusion?

There is a general recognition that, notwithstanding the major declines of the past 60 years, considerable efforts have been made to safeguard threatened species, thanks to the establishment of nature reserves and to the protection offered by sites of special scientific interest—SSSIs. The volunteers and various organisations engaged in such work are to be applauded for their valiant efforts. I should also like to add my appreciation of those enlightened farmers and landowners who value the importance of wild flowers and have taken steps not only to protect them but positively to encourage an increase in their numbers and the areas in which they can flourish.

I am most grateful to the many people who have provided background briefing for my contribution this evening, including Terri Tarpey, Jerry Heath and members of the Colchester natural history society. I am also grateful to Mr. Paul Vickers, the countryside sites manager for Colchester borough council. I am delighted to say that the council has implemented a policy of creating wild flower meadows and reserves for almost 20 years, as a direct result of a policy measure that I pushed for when I was mayor of Britain's oldest recorded town, Colchester, in 1986–87. I should like to quote the good news given by Mr. Vickers, which I suggest is an excellent example that many other local authorities should be encouraged to follow. He says that he is

"responsible for 430 hectares of Colchester Borough Council owned countryside open space land, that is land that is publicly accessible and possesses high landscape and wildlife value. The land consists of country parks, nature reserves and farmland."

I should like to make special mention of the High Woods and Cymbeline Meadows country parks, which are two success stories of the former Liberal Democrat council, of which I was once the leader. Mr. Vickers continues:

"Approximately 200 hectares of the land is 'conservation grassland'. Since the 1980s many larger sites have been converted from former arable by the Council, and sown with indigenous grasses and wild flowers. They are now looked after by programmes of grazing or hay cutting each year. This annual management is based around site management planning, citizen science, rangering, environmental education and community engagement. The original work has proved enduring and these sites are a much-loved part of Colchester's natural heritage. They are used by hundreds of thousands of visitors for informal recreation each year in addition to the formal educational use by many local schools and colleges. They have encouraged local people to take pride in Colchester and engendered protection of local greenspaces. Seven of the sites have been designated as Local Nature Reserves by the Council in recognition of their importance to local people and local wildlife. (Bull Meadow, Lexden Park, Lexden Springs, Hilly Fields, Lower Lodge Farm, Salary Brook and Wivenhoe Ferry Marsh.) They are a diverse group of sites—heath, marsh, wet grassland and neutral grassland. Collectively they support a wide range of local flora and fauna, many locally scarce."

I should like to put some questions to the Minister. If he cannot answer them tonight, perhaps he could write to me later and place a copy of his reply in the Library.

Threatened status in the new red list is determined by evidence of decline, but many of our rarest species are found only in a handful of sites that conservationists have managed successfully over the last few decades. They have therefore not declined, and are now not classed as threatened, although their continued survival

depends on direct conservation action. Can the Minister give an assurance that those species will not slip through the conservation net?

Agri-environmental schemes are often touted as effective mechanisms to protect and enhance biodiversity in the wider countryside. Such schemes, however, do not include enough monitoring of plant populations to ensure that they are having the desired effects. We are experimenting with our landscape, and we are effectively blindfolded. Can the Minister give an assurance that adequate funds and resources will be devoted to monitoring the botanical impact of agri-environmental schemes so that it can be properly assessed?

The Government's biodiversity action plan seeks to deliver conservation for all threatened species. Can the Minister give an assurance that all new additions to the red list will be included in an updated United Kingdom biodiversity action plan? Can the Minister give an assurance that adequate funds will be made available for conservation work?

The new red list includes many species classed as being threatened for the first time, and it may be appropriate to protect the sites where they are found. Can the Minister give an assurance that, despite the current emphasis in Government on securing favourable status for the existing protected-site network—the SSSIs—there is a programme of work to continue to identify new SSSIs?

Some wild plants receive statutory protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which protects species perceived to be at risk from collection. However, our wild plants face many more threats, such as habitat destruction. Given that many species in the new red list are still widespread but have declined significantly, does the legislation need to be widened and strengthened so that the habitats of those species are protected from destruction before it is too late?

I draw Members' attention to the forthcoming Chelsea flower show, and urge them to visit the Wildlife Trusts Lush Garden. The garden is described thus:

"Sited on a gentle slope, the Wildlife Trusts' Lush Garden nestles softly into a mature landscape of orchard and wild flower meadow . . .

Past the garden building a small meadow of flowering grasses and wild flowers sway".

We can all picture the scene. The garden was designed by Giles Landscapes' design principal, Mr. Stephen Hall. The company is based in Welney, on the border between Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. This is something we can all look forward to.

I began by asking "Where have all the flowers gone?" I am grateful for the words of Pete Seeger, who went on to say:

"Long time passing

Where have all the flowers gone?

Long time ago

Where have all the flowers gone?"

I hope that the Minister will promise tonight that the Government will take positive measures to restore the wild flower meadows of Britain.

6.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Knight): I congratulate the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on securing the debate. He ended as he began, by quoting from "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?" I am not sure whether he was, or is, much of a hippie, but I recall his work as mayor of Colchester in the local wild flower meadow campaign and I am told that, given his equal love of darts, he is known in some of Colchester's pubs as Bob "The Flower Power" Russell. We must draw our own conclusions.

This is my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as a Minister. I am pleased that it is so early in the Session and that it is in my capacity as Minister with responsibility for biodiversity that I respond to this debate. It is an opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Alun Michael), who did a fantastic job as an advocate for rural areas and the countryside. I am sure that he will be missed at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as much as he is welcomed at the Department of Trade and Industry.

The future of wild flowers is very important and the hon. Gentleman is right to be as concerned as he is. Protecting natural resources such as flower species is important in its own right but it also matters to our constituents as part of the need to improve our quality of life. Twenty-first century life is full of pressures just to get by. Dealing with those stresses and strains makes relaxation and recreation of increasing importance to the Government and that informs our emphasis on enhancing biodiversity. Wild flowers are very much part of that wider story.

Another part of my new portfolio is rural affairs. Those of us who live in rural England and the many others who visit it want to enjoy our beautiful landscape, the birds, the animals and the other plants as well as the wild flowers. That appreciation adds hugely to our quality of life and to our rural economy. I was reading this week that a project in Cornwall to protect the chough, a symbol of that county, has generated extra visitors worth over £100,000 to the economy of Cornwall, so this is not just about biodiversity. There is a much wider agenda, which I will pursue during my tenure of this ministerial position. Biodiversity generally, and wild flowers specifically, are crucial and worthy of debate in this House.

The debate is informed by the new red data list for vascular plants that was launched last week and that, for the first time, provides, as the hon. Gentleman said, a thorough assessment of the whole of the British flora, not just species that were considered nationally rare or scarce. I pay tribute to the many people who worked so hard to compile that authoritative and useful report. Up to that point, DEFRA and its partners principally focused attention on rare and scarce species in the absence of the more complete picture that we now have, which has been to good effect.

When one analyses the past week's media coverage of the report, it is easy to regard it as a doomsday scenario. We must not be complacent. There is plenty of work to do, but some rare species that appeared in previous versions of the red data list are no longer included

[Jim Knight]

because, while still rare, they now have stable populations. Often, they are looked after in national nature reserves or wildlife trust reserves, as the hon. Gentleman said. Examples include goldilocks aster, string sedge and dwarf spike-rush. Cowslips have also returned to the chalk downland in Berkshire. I am sure that we all celebrate the progress on those species and that we will continue to want to conserve the species whose populations have now stabilised.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the report shows that a high proportion—80 per cent.—of our flora is not under threat, but it highlights that 345 British vascular plants are under threat, while a further 98 are "near threatened". This is the first time that an analysis has been carried out of the entire British flora, so it is perhaps not surprising that a large number of new species have been added to the red list. There are familiar examples of decline. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the corn buttercup on more than one occasion. It is one of many arable plants affected by changing farming practices. The use of herbicides, field margins and shifting to autumn-sown crops are some of the practices implicated. The field gentian has been declining in uplands due to overgrazing. If you were to look at a copy of the report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would see that the illustration on the front is of the field gentian. The green-winged orchid has suffered from the loss of lowland meadows and the frogbit is disappearing due to the draining of marshland for arable use, so we have challenges to face and we are not complacent.

We have a three-pronged approach to help reverse any further decline and improve the abundance of our rarer plants: first, robust legal protection that is regularly reviewed; secondly, the promotion of different farming methods to encourage the abundance of wildflowers; and, thirdly, the continuation of our crucial work to enhance biodiversity generally through the action plan process.

Taking those in turn, the main legislative tool is the protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Schedule 8 contains a list of plants the status of which is of most conservation concern and which are therefore given the greatest legal protection against intentional picking, uprooting, destruction or sale. This includes plants such as lady's slipper, red helleborine and fringed gentian, each of which is described as "critically endangered" on the new red data list.

Every five years, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee reviews the plant species listed in schedule 8 and then advises the Government and the devolved Administrations. The last such review took place in 2001, when the JNCC recommended that no plant species should be added to or removed from schedule 8. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we shall carefully consider the findings of the next review, which is due next year, and update the legislation as necessary, particularly in the light of the work that we are discussing this evening.

We are also introducing two additional relevant pieces of legislation in this Queen's Speech. The hon. Gentleman referred to the natural environment and rural communities Bill, which will be introduced soon and establishes Natural England to preserve and enhance the natural environment while enabling access for social and economic benefit. He asked when it would be established. We are saying in the Bill that it will be by January 2007. I am sure that we would like to bring that forward slightly if we can, but that is the deadline that we are setting ourselves. The Bill also includes provisions to prevent the infiltration of non-native species from overseas into the UK, which is directly relevant to wild flowers, especially in the light of the concerns over the European bluebell. Natural England will be an active voice in the planning process, which I hope will give some reassurance, although I am sure that it will not completely reassure the hon. Gentleman or allay all his concerns about housing development.

The other legislation in the Queen's Speech of relevance is the common land Bill, which will be important in enhancing sites of special scientific interest. More than half of common land is made up of SSSIs, but over 40 per cent. of those are not up to adequate standards. If we are to meet our target of bringing 95 per cent. of SSSIs up to a proper standard by 2010, we must take action in respect of common land, and the Bill will allow those sites to be more easily managed, and thereby prevent the overgrazing that has caused so much damage to species such as the field gentian.

The second prong is the use of the agri-environment schemes. The environmental stewardship scheme was launched on 3 March 2005. It is a new agri-environment scheme that funds farmers and other land managers in England who deliver effective environmental management on their land. The scheme builds on the success of the countryside stewardship and environmentally sensitive area schemes. One key objective is to conserve wildlife, which includes wild flowers. Specific options under the new scheme require land managers to carry out careful management that will encourage the increase in wild flower species. For example, there is an opportunity to manage field margins more sympathetically and thereby improve the prospects for flowers such as the corn buttercup.

Agri-environment schemes, including environmental stewardship, protect and enhance landscapes. Prescriptions for careful management are drawn up in consultation with partners, including English Nature and the Countryside Agency—soon to be Natural England. Land managers receive annual payments over 10 years to comply with stringent management conditions, such as limiting grazing or stopping ploughing or the use of fertiliser, fungicides or pesticides. That, as the hon. Gentleman knows, will encourage a welcome increase in wild flowers in the countryside.

With the introduction of the entry level environmental stewardship scheme, worth £150 million a year, we aim to cover the majority of English farmland and we shall be able to tackle countrywide problems such as the loss of these wild flowers. It is precisely because of the need to join up the thinking around these payments to farmers with natural resource protection that Natural England is being formed out of English Nature, the Countryside Agency and elements of the rural development service.

I hope that we can also prevent SSSIs from becoming isolated fragments of conversation by using those incentives. Those in agriculture do much to shape our landscape—we have much to thank farmers for in the

beautiful landscape that we all enjoy—but I hope that the use of those incentives and schemes will ensure that the protection and enhancement of our environment, including wild flowers, can continue outside the pockets of SSSIs, nature reserves and so on.

The third prong is the biodiversity action plan process. The UK biodiversity action plan was published in January 1994, in response to article 6 of the convention on biological diversity. It helps to co-ordinate work nationally and locally, by identifying priorities for action and setting biological targets for the recovery of habitats and species, including wildflowers.

Maintaining and enhancing habitats, species and ecosystems are the key elements of our work on biodiversity. Last month, the Government announced funding worth nearly £2 million in the form of grants for 30 biodiversity projects across the country. The money, which comes from the DEFRA's environmental action fund, will support projects that play an important role in highlighting and integrating biodiversity into all walks of life.

Since 1995, a total of 436 UK priority species and habitat action plans and about 150 local biodiversity action plans have been published. Among the species action plans are many for endangered wild flowers, including a grouped plan for eyebrights—one of the species mentioned in the recent red data list. However, we do not live in a static world. Existing habitat and species action plans and associated targets were based on the best information available at the time.

To respond to new information such as that contained in the new red data list, new conservation opportunities and changing threats to species and habitats, it is important to report regularly and assess the lists periodically. We have agreed therefore to a full review of the UK biodiversity action plan this year. Of course, we will take full account of the new, complete red data list in that review. We will gather as much quantitative data as possible and will prepare revised candidate priority lists based on scientific criteria.

To an extent, the 436 priority species and 150 local biodiversity action plans involved make a strategic approach difficult, and we must do some strategic work, looking across the whole spread, to determine how we assess the priorities. So, as a second stage, we will look at the feasibility and appropriateness of taking conservation action. We aim to publish a provisional list of priorities in March 2006, for wider consultation with not only hon. Members who take such a great interest in these issues, such as the hon. Member for Colchester, but with partner agencies, wildlife trusts and local activists throughout the country, who are so passionate about this important issue. The final stage will be to consider feedback and identify a suite of conservation implementation measures using a collective approach to all species and habitats. The intention is to complete this process before the end of 2006.

I am delighted that we have had this opportunity to debate this important issue, which lies at the heart of my responsibility for biodiversity. I have not been able to cover some of the questions that the hon. Gentleman asked to give him full satisfaction, but I will endeavour to write to him and place the answers to those questions in the Library, as he requested. However, there is much to do as we look forward, and we are developing the tools in government to do it.

The red data list, along with other research, gives a more accurate picture of the problems and challenges that we face. The natural environment and rural communities Bill will give us the delivery agency to act properly. With legislation, the agri-environment schemes and the biodiversity action plans, Natural England will have the levers that it needs to continue to make good progress. We should not duck the problem or be complacent about its scale but we should be optimistic that, by working together and in partnership and using those tools and levers, we can make good progress as we look forward into the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eleven minutes to Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 19 May 2005

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

HBOS GROUP REORGANISATION BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the HBOS Group Reorganisation Bill which originated in this House in the previous session on 25th January 2005 may have leave to proceed with the bill in the current session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of Bills);

That on the next sitting day following presentation of the Bill, the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay the Bill on the Table of the House.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND TRANSPORT FOR LONDON BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the London Local Authorities and Transport for London Bill which originated in this House in the previous session on 25th January 2005 may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current session according to the provision of Standing Order 188B (Revival of Bills);

That, on the next sitting day following presentation of the Bill, the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay the Bill on the Table of the House.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Business of the House

10.34 am

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Before asking for next week's business, I congratulate the Leader of the House and the Deputy Leader of the House on their appointments. I suspect that the Leader's new post may be a welcome respite after holding one of the most difficult posts in Government in the past few years. It remains to be seen whether he will find it a rest after a few months of dealing with his colleagues on the Back Benches. However, I congratulate them both.

Will the Leader of the House please give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons and Lord Privy Seal (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments, which we reciprocate.

Mr. Speaker, you informed the House on Tuesday of the subjects for debate on the Queen's Speech. The business for next week will therefore be:

MONDAY 23 MAY—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech.

TUESDAY 24 MAY—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech, followed by motions to approve the Draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) Orders 2005 relating to Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, Virgin Islands and Montserrat.

WEDNESDAY 25 MAY—Conclusion of the debate on the Queen's Speech, followed by motion to approve ways and means resolutions on which a Finance Bill will be introduced.

THURSDAY 26 MAY—Motion on the Whitsun recess Adjournment.

FRIDAY 27 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week after Whitsun will include:

MONDAY 6 JUNE—Second Reading of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for Thursday 26 May will be:

THURSDAY 26 MAY—A debate on the millennium review summit.

It may assist the House to know that, subject to the resolutions being approved by the House on 25 May, the Finance Bill will be published on Thursday 26 May.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce the Commons calendar for Parliament until Christmas 2005. We plan to rise for the Whitsun recess on Thursday 26 May and return on Monday 6 June. For the summer recess, the House will rise on Thursday 21 July and return on Monday 10 October. For Christmas, we will rise on Tuesday 20 December and return on Monday 9 January. That is subject, as ever, to the standard Government health warning about the progress of business.

A copy of the new calendar is available from the Vote Office now and I encourage hon. Members to study it carefully.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving us the details of future business.

[Chris Grayling]

I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman had so little to say, and so little intention of including business on, global warming and this country's response to it. He will remember that, before the election, the Prime Minister said that it was the biggest issue that our country faces. It was therefore surprising to hear nothing about it in the Queen's Speech. It is obviously not on the agenda at the moment—that will come as a surprise to many people inside and outside this place.

Will the Leader of the House please give us an update on the timetable for appointing Select Committee members and Chairmen, especially in the light of the Chairmen's meeting in July, when the Prime Minister will be interviewed again? It is obviously important to get Chairmen in place before that.

When will the Bill on the European constitutional referendum be published? Will the right hon. Gentleman clear up the confusion of the past 24 hours? Will the Bill contain a firm, definite and immovable date for the referendum? Will he clarify the position?

Will the Leader of the House provide an early opportunity for the House to consider the system of ministerial appointments in this country, especially whether it should be possible for someone to receive millions of pounds from substantial Government contracts, make a major financial contribution to the Government and then become a Minister in that Government? Is not that the sort of behaviour that the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues have a habit of criticising vigorously when it happens in other countries?

I am sure that the Leader of the House and I share the hope that what we all do in the House during this Parliament will encourage greater interest in the democratic process. Does he therefore share my disappointment that the Queen's Speech debates this week have been curtailed owing to a lack of interest and lack of willingness to speak among Labour Members? Does he believe that that is a sign of things to come?

Mr. Hoon: I am surprised to hear the shadow Leader of the House complain about the lack of discussion on the important subject of global warming, given that we are about to start a debate on precisely that subject, once the business question is resolved. There will be every opportunity for Ministers and other right hon. and hon. Members to discuss the issue in the course of that debate.

It is certainly my intention to have the Select Committees up and running before the summer recess. I hope also to be able to assist the House in relation to the publication of the Bill dealing with the referendum. Exceptionally, I would like to announce that we propose to introduce it on Tuesday next, 24 May. I hope that that will be of assistance to Members in illustrating the Government's determination that there should be a referendum.

I am sure that the shadow Leader of the House knows full well that all ministerial appointments are made in accordance with the relevant rules, and there have been no exceptions whatever on this occasion.

I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's concern that there should be greater interest in the democratic process. It is in the interest of all Members to establish ways of increasing turnout. I made the point in my acceptance speech following the announcement of the result in Ashfield that the amount of effort and energy put in by all Members to promoting democracy around the world must be matched by a similar effort so far as turnout in our own constituencies is concerned. That is a challenge for all political parties.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): I am sorry to see that we seem to have reverted to the 80-day summer recess. Nothing brings us into discredit with our constituents so much as the idea—which I know is false in many cases—that we take two and a half months off in the summer. I had understood that we were to come back for a couple of weeks in September; I thought that that had been agreed some time ago. Is the suspension of the September sittings permanent or temporary? I understand that this suspension might have something to do with the fitting of a new security screen, but I would like an assurance from my right hon. Friend that we shall revert to the arrangement that I thought had been agreed.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter. I know that the question of the September sitting is of concern to right hon. and hon. Members. This year, the specific reason for there not being a September sitting is the works that will have to be carried out in the Chamber to install a permanent security screen—my hon. Friend was right in that regard. That does not mean, however, that we have taken any particular decision as far as the future is concerned.

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): May I also welcome the new Leader of the House and his deputy to their posts? I am sure that, with the right hon. Gentleman's background in constitutional law, he will appreciate the importance of his role in serving the whole House. Bearing that in mind, will he give us an assurance that, next time he is in charge of the House at the time of a Queen's Speech, he will ensure that the bundle of information given to the press in advance is also available to all Members of the House?

Will the Leader of the House also refer back to the work of his predecessors on the Modernisation Committee to produce a report that recommended the establishment of a business management committee? Such a committee would provide an opportunity for the whole House to take part in the timetabling and management of the Government's Bills throughout the year. That would avoid a logjam of business during the year, and the poor scrutiny that can result from that. It might even moderate some of the opposition that Bills could face in the Lords on the ground that they have not been adequately scrutinised. It would be helpful if the Leader of the House commented on that procedure. May I conclude by saying that I hope that he will share with the House more Government secrets in his new role than he ever did in his previous one?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes and, indeed, for his parting shot, if I may describe it in that way.

In regard to the point of order raised yesterday by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Right honourable!

Mr. Hoon: My apologies. I asked for the information to be deposited in the Library for the information of Members at the earliest opportunity, and it is my understanding that that was done. For the benefit of the House, particularly the more technically minded Members—I do not think that that includes the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst—Members might like to be reminded that information on the Queen's Speech, including detailed briefings about the Bills, is available on my website, at www.commonsleader.gov.uk. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman can take the appropriate courses to allow him to access that information.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I too welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position, not just because he has been a close friend of mine for nearly 30 years—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] These things do happen. I also welcome him to his position, because—as some Conservative Members will remember from the 1990s—when he was on these Benches he showed himself to be a great respecter and user of the traditions and procedures of the House. Will he be sure to inculcate the same respect in some of his fellow Cabinet Ministers, who have not always shown the commitment that he has always shown to making announcements first and foremost from the Dispatch Box, and not outside and through the media?

Mr. Hoon: I think I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that I can respond in kind. When I first met the hon. Gentleman at the university of Cambridge, I had him down as a future leader of the Conservative party. I know it is a crowded field at the moment, but I am grateful for what he said and I wish him every success in his endeavours, wherever they may lead.

As for respect, it is certainly important—as I hope I made clear earlier in my response to yesterday's point of order—for all Ministers to respect the conventions of the House, and to ensure that proper information is available to all Members.

William Hague (Richmond, Yorks) (Con): Will the Leader of the House, in his new role—which, of course, covers the whole range of Government policy—acquaint himself with the truly bizarre side-effects of the Government's policy on the capping of local authorities? Those side-effects include the capping of a council with one of the lowest council taxes in the country, Hambleton in north Yorkshire. Given the perhaps not wholly unfounded suspicion that the policy was motivated by electoral and political considerations, will the Leader of the House advise his colleagues that it can now happily be dropped, thus saving the House's time? If he will not do that, will he ensure that there is the fullest possible debate on the policy, so that its grave deficiencies can be fully exposed?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman was not suggesting for a moment that the policy was in any way motivated by the recent general election or the election campaign, but I give him the opportunity to confirm that. Nevertheless, it is important for the rules and the approach to be seen to be transparent, fair and objective in the case of all local authorities. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept from me that that is the position.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Has the new Leader of the House had an opportunity to see a BBC weather forecast recently? If so, he may have noticed that the BBC is employing a new graphic viewing the country from the south-west of England. The land mass has expanded, the country tapers away at the top, and my constituency, which is rightly famous for having some of the most interesting and varied weather in the country, is barely visible.

Many of my constituents depend on reliable weather forecasting for their living as fishermen, farmers and crofters. Surely it is wrong for us to be excluded from BBC services in this way. Has the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport a view on the matter? If so, may we have an opportunity to hear it as part of next week's business?

Mr. Hoon: I knew I was in for a treat when I was appointed to this job. One of the little-known responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Defence is, in fact, the Met Office. In the course of those responsibilities I visited the new Met Office, and saw the tremendous facilities there. I regret to say that my responsibilities did not extend to the way in which the BBC presents material supplied by the Met Office, but I am sure that the director-general of the BBC will note the hon. Gentleman's comments and take appropriate action.

Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): Does the Leader of the House accept that it is essential for the Foreign Secretary to come here next week and make a statement on our relationship with Uzbekistan? Many of us believe that our ex-ambassador Craig Murray has been treated disgracefully by the Foreign Secretary, and that no action was taken against human rights abuses in that country. We would like the Foreign Secretary to make an apology from that Dispatch Box.

Mr. Hoon: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is assiduous in making statements. I have not checked the number of statements that he has made in the course of his distinguished occupancy of his position, but he has come to the Dispatch Box regularly to make them, and I am sure that if he judges it necessary, there will be a statement on Uzbekistan. He has made the British Government's position quite clear. The British ambassador visited the troubled part of Uzbekistan yesterday, and I know that the Foreign Office is awaiting a detailed report from him on what he found there.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Given his responsibilities for the House itself and for the management of business, can the Leader of the House share with us how he thinks that we can possibly scrutinise properly and effectively in excess of 45 Bills, even in an extended parliamentary Session? Does he

[Mr. Eric Forth]

seriously think that the House and indeed the other place can properly discharge their duties in terms of scrutiny in that time? If not, what does he propose to do about it?

Mr. Hoon: As the right hon. Gentleman has conceded, this is an 18-month Session. The business managers judge that there is perfectly adequate time to get through the programme that has been announced to the House. As always, co-operation from both sides of the House is required to ensure that there is proper scrutiny of that legislation. I am absolutely confident that that proper co-operation will be forthcoming.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): In welcoming the new Leader of the House to his post, may I advise him to set a trend and to establish twice-yearly debates on science and technology? This House neglects science and technology. The Minister for Science and Innovation is in the House of Lords, so we cannot question him about his work; and we live in an anti-science culture. Great issues face us such as nuclear energy, so we need to take the issue more seriously. An Adjournment debate would be warmly welcomed.

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am slightly averse to setting trends after only 20 minutes in the House doing a new job. Nevertheless, he makes a good point about the importance of science and technology. I am sure that something can be considered through the usual channels.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): The Queen's Speech says:

"The Government will bring forward proposals to continue the reform of the House of Lords."

There is no mention of a Bill and no time scale. May I make a suggestion that will save us all a lot of time and trouble? At the end of the previous Parliament, a draft Bill was introduced with the support of members of all three parties. Why does not the Leader of the House just introduce that and get on with it?

Mr. Hoon: Because, as the right hon. Gentleman will be well aware, it is necessary for us to consider carefully the important issues. On other occasions, right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches have urged the Government to take their time and to consider carefully the implications of important constitutional measures, and that is what we will do.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): In presenting the Government's programme for the next 18 months, will the Leader of the House ensure that we have enough time to debate the 45 Bills that he and his colleagues wish to see on the statute book? In the previous Parliament, the Government's programme became farcical as they guillotined and prevented debate on a range of highly important public policy issues. He can make a new start and, with renewed self-confidence following his party's election to a third term in government, allow the House of Commons to do what it is supposed to do, which is to scrutinise legislation.

Mr. Hoon: I do not disagree with the hon. and learned Gentleman: it is important that Bills are scrutinised thoroughly. But may I gently remind him that it is the practice occasionally of Opposition Members in dealing with Bills to spend an inordinate amount of time on the first two clauses and not to devote any time to the remaining parts of the Bill? I have been on many Bills where the Opposition have done that. Indeed, in opposition, I did it. That is why it is necessary properly to consider the way in which these Bills will be considered by the House. I am confident that through the usual channels that will be the case.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Did the Leader of the House notice that, yesterday, in an excellent maiden speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) drew the House's attention to the fact that the recent rebanding exercise for council tax in Wales has meant that some 40 per cent. of properties in his constituency have gone up by one band and many have gone up by two or even three? Can the Leader of the House ensure that before the summer Adjournment we have the opportunity to debate council tax revaluation, or at least rebanding, with the appropriate Minister coming to the House to explain how that will happen? In constituencies such as mine, we are fearful that that exercise will mean large numbers of our constituents will pay substantially more council tax.

Mr. Hoon: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating not only the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) on his excellent maiden speech but all new Members—those who have already made their maiden speeches and those who are about to. It is important, once elected to the House, to serve the House in the way that those who have been re-elected have always done.

I did not recognise on my last trip to Banbury that the constituency extended to Wales. I am delighted to hear of the hon. Gentleman's concern about the situation there. As I said earlier, there is a review of the implications of council tax, including revaluation. Obviously it is important that we allow that review to be concluded before the Government take a position on any recommendations.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): Towards the end of the last Parliament, the Government accepted in the Modernisation Committee that we should be able to table written questions during the summer recess. As the Leader of the House has today announced that the summer recess will be longer than was originally planned, will he ensure that there is an opportunity for the relevant motion to be laid so that those of us who wish to hold the Government to account, even during the summer recess, have that opportunity?

Mr. Hoon: The arrangements for September this year are exceptional as a result of necessary work to the Chamber. I do not intend, therefore, to make that provision on this occasion. The matter can be looked at when and if the Modernisation Committee is re-established.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): May we have a statement from the Leader's successor as Defence Secretary on whether a decision has been taken in

principle to build a new generation of Britain's strategic nuclear deterrent? That would greatly reassure the two thirds of British people who in poll after poll, year after year, and decade after decade have felt that Britain should continue to possess nuclear weapons so long as other countries have them—although it might not reassure a number of people on Labour's Front and Back Benches.

Mr. Hoon: When the hon. Gentleman referred to the Leader's successor I was for a moment a little troubled. I assure him that the matter will rightly preoccupy the House in the months and years to come. It was the subject of a great deal of debate yesterday in the Queen's Speech debate devoted to international affairs and defence. I am confident that right hon. and hon. Members will return to the subject regularly during this Parliament.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Next month will mark three years since the Government produced the draft mental health Bill, which they described as a priority. Since then it has been roundly condemned by thousands of professionals, voluntary bodies, users and, indeed, my party. The pre-legislative Scrutiny Committee produced its report in March in singularly condemning terms. Can the Leader of the House give us some indication of when the Minister will respond to that report, and tell us when we might see the final mental health Bill and whether it will take account of the enormous amount of criticism that has resulted? Given that we have not had a single debate on mental health issues in all that time, will he now provide time in this House for us to discuss this important subject?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this vital subject. Many right hon. and hon. Members take these questions seriously. The issues are hugely difficult for the country and it is right that the Secretary of State for Health should consider carefully the recommendations of the report. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman's words are brought to the attention of the Secretary of State for Health, and I hope that we can make progress.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an early debate on the Government's failure to take key strategic decisions, in particular on the full fitting-out of the St. Pancras international rail station to allow proper access to other rail and underground services? The delay is not only threatening severe inconvenience and disruption, but also suggests a lack of commitment to infrastructure in an increasingly overcrowded—at Government instigation—south-east of England. Would a debate on these failures to take key decisions set our minds at rest?

Mr. Hoon: As a regular user of St. Pancras station, I can say that there has been a remarkable transformation. As a great admirer of the architecture, I am delighted that the Government have been willing to see the restoration of that fine building and of the hotel—restored, I hope, to some of its former glory. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State for Transport is made aware of the hon. Gentleman's comments and I hope that he will write to the hon. Gentleman accordingly.

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): May we have a debate soon on England and the West Lothian question, in the light of the fact that in the election in England the Labour party received 8,045,806 votes and the Conservative party received 8,102,663 votes?

Mr. Hoon: The Conservative party used to be the Conservative and Unionist party, and I assumed that it had a commitment to the constitution of the United Kingdom, which clearly allows everyone in the United Kingdom the opportunity of voting for Members of this House, and long may that continue.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): Does the Leader of the House know whether the Welsh and Scottish Grand Committees will consider the Queen's Speech? If they do, at least we may get some participation from members of his own party.

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am still struggling to come to terms with being Leader of this House, and I am not yet ready to answer questions on behalf of other democratically elected institutions.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent) (Con): I, too, welcome the Leader of the House to his new position. He will be aware that the next six weeks are vital to London's chances of hosting the 2012 Olympics. The evaluation team report is due out at the beginning of June and the decision itself comes through on 6 July. Given that cross-party support is vital to the success of the bid, will he make Government time available for a debate in this House on the London 2012 bid?

Mr. Hoon: What is important—I accept the spirit of the hon. Gentleman's observations—is that we make early and urgent progress on the legislation that will be necessary should, as I hope, Britain be awarded the 2012 bid. It was referred to in the Queens's Speech and, exceptionally, an indication was given that it would be necessary to introduce the legislation at an early date, should we be successful. I will then obviously be looking for co-operation from the Opposition Benches to ensure that that legislation is in place as early as possible.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): Given the Leader of the House's former appointment as Defence Secretary, I know that he will be as concerned as I am about the fact that it is likely that fewer than half of servicemen and servicewomen were registered to vote in the general election this year. Not only that, but those who were registered to vote in Iraq, Afghanistan or wherever by post, had no opportunity to return those votes. Will he instigate an inquiry into how many people were registered to vote and how many people were able to vote, and ensure that next time an election comes up our servicemen and women in places of danger, serving this country, have the opportunity to vote properly?

Mr. Hoon: This was a matter that concerned me in my previous position. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying this, I investigated some of the statistics on voting and registration that he made available to the media immediately before the general election. Unfortunately, those statistics were somewhat unreliable. It is important that all citizens have the

[Mr. Hoon]

opportunity to vote. That must include members of Her Majesty's armed forces, particularly when they are serving abroad. An enormous effort was made by the Ministry of Defence and by the chain of command to ensure that members of the armed forces took up their opportunity of registering and voting.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): The Leader of the House said a moment ago that there were no exceptions to the rules relating to the appointment of Ministers. Is he aware that Lord Drayson is visiting RAF Marham in West Norfolk this week? As my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House said, this is someone who paid huge sums of money to Labour, received a plum contract for his company, then received a peerage, and then received a plum job in government. Is that not unfair to many hard-working Labour Members of Parliament who would love that sort of rapid promotion? Is it not an insult to those loyal and patriotic RAF service personnel?

Mr. Hoon: What I find curious about the hon. Gentleman's observations is that time after time from the Opposition Benches we have had criticisms of Ministers for not having relevant business experience. Here is a man who has been an entrepreneur, and a remarkably successful business man. He has now taken on, as I know from my own experience in the Department, a responsibility that requires that business acumen, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and others of his colleagues will congratulate him on having it.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): May I refer the Leader of the House to early-day motion 76, on speed cameras?

[*That this House notes that the number of speed cameras has risen dramatically on UK roads; further notes that the Government itself has admitted that not all of them are appropriately placed and that motorists are increasingly frustrated that many of them are installed as a cash raising mechanism; and calls on the Government to launch a thorough review of all speed camera locations leading to the removal of cameras which do not improve road safety.*]

Is it possible to arrange for a transport Minister to come to the House to state whether there will be a full review of the siting of speed cameras? He will be aware that many people believe that the cameras are there to raise money, not to reduce accidents on the roads. A number of my constituents will no doubt be opening letters today telling them that they have been nobbled for doing 36 mph in a 30-mph zone, and they will find it incongruous that a police officer could be clocked for doing 159 mph and get away with it.

Mr. Hoon: I am not going to be tempted into commenting on recent court decisions, but if the hon. Gentleman is anxious to have a debate on the subject, it sounds like a perfect topic for an Adjournment debate or indeed a debate in Westminster Hall.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): In warmly congratulating the Leader of the House on his appointment, may I politely urge him to seek, above all, to emulate the example of two of his predecessors—the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the right hon. Member for Livingston (Robin Cook), who always handled the skill of dealing with the House in a courteous and robust fashion? If he can do as well as that, he will be doing remarkably well indeed.

Given the publication of the report of the Commission for Africa, the imperative of trade reform, the pandemic of AIDS and the overriding requirement for deep and thoroughgoing debt relief, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a decision by the Government no longer to relegate those issues to the subsidiary chamber of Westminster Hall, but rather to guarantee regular debates on motions for Adjournment on the Floor of the House, would send out a powerful signal about our seriousness of purpose and our strength of feeling on issues crucial to the future of the planet?

Mr. Hoon: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Whether it is possible always to be both courteous and robust will be a matter that he will judge in the weeks and months to come. I shall certainly endeavour to represent the views of the House and to ensure that it is treated in accordance with best principles.

The Prime Minister has made clear—it was also set out in the Queen's Speech—the importance that he attaches to the issues that the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) has championed in the House in a number of fine speeches. I can assure him that those issues will be a priority both for the Government's handling of the G8 and of the EU. Inevitably, too, they will rightly be dealt with on the Floor of the House on a regular basis.

Point of Order

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Could you instruct the Serjeant at Arms to check whether the Annunciator monitors are working in all the parliamentary buildings? Clearly, Labour Members are unaware that the House is sitting today—or perhaps they do not know that our sittings now start at 10.30 on Thursdays, even though they voted for those changes. Otherwise they would be in their places to question the Leader of the House on our future business.

Mr. Speaker: The important thing is that I am here and so is the hon. Gentleman.

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

George Galloway, *for* Bethnal Green and Bow

Patrick Hall, Bedford

Dan Norris, Wansdyke

BILLS PRESENTED

Natural Environment and Rural Communities

Secretary Margaret Beckett, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Darling, Mr. Secretary Hain and Jim Knight presented a Bill to make provision about bodies concerned with the natural environment and rural communities; to make provision in connection with wildlife, sites of special scientific interest, National Parks and the Broads; to amend the law relating to rights of way; to make provision as to the Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council; to provide for flexible administrative arrangements in connection with functions relating to the environment and rural affairs and certain other functions; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday 23 May and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 3].

Transport (Wales)

Mr. Secretary Hain, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Darling, Secretary Alan Johnson, Mr. Secretary Clarke, Mr. John Hutton, Bridget Prentice and Nick Ainger, presented a Bill to make provision about transport to, from and within Wales: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday 23 May, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 4].

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[THIRD DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [17 May],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign.

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—*[Mr. Barron.]*

Question again proposed.

Industry and the Environment

11.10 am

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Alan Johnson): It is a delight to open the debate on the Gracious Speech this morning, and to debate industry and the environment together. Those agendas have sometimes been seen as conflicting, but it has become increasingly clear that they must advance together. Business needs to be greener, and greens need to be more business-oriented, because only through innovation and sustainable development can we ensure that society meets the major challenge of our times—tackling climate change.

The prerequisite for industrial success is the strong and stable economy that our country currently enjoys. Our long-term interest rates are around their lowest levels since the 1960s and we are enjoying the longest sustained growth in gross domestic product on record, the longest period of sustained low inflation for 40 years and the highest employment levels in our history. We have narrowed the productivity gap with other leading economies in sectors such as computer, legal, technical and advertising services and we are now, for the first time in generations, as productive as Germany and have overtaken France to become the fourth largest economy in the world. With 2.2 million more people in work since 1997, our employment rate is higher than that of any other G7 country. We have 300,000 more businesses than in 1997, with new companies starting at the rate of more than a thousand every day. Our science base is strong, because we have reversed decades of under-investment. In short, Britain has never worked so productively, created so much wealth and generated so many jobs as in today's enterprising and innovative economy.

All that has not happened through serendipity. It has happened because our workers and businesses have excelled within a supportive economic framework set by this Government, including an independent Bank of England, tough fiscal rules and help for those outside the labour market through the new deal. As a result, Britain has become one of the most favourable environments for starting and growing a business.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. Does he recall that, when he was a Minister of State, I had the pleasure of shadowing him for a while, and on several occasions, he said that the UK's opt-out from the working time directive was not negotiable? Is that still the case, and what does he say to his socialist Members of the European Parliament who voted to give up that opt-out?

Alan Johnson: It is still the case that we are determined to maintain the opt-out, and we believe that we have the best situation, because workers in this country have protection and cannot be forced to work beyond 48 hours, but if they choose to work more hours, they should be allowed to do so. The hon. Gentleman should not tempt me to talk about MEPs. I do not know whether he has seen the letter in *The Daily Telegraph* this morning headed, "Please don't let me elect the new Tory leader." It is from Roger Helmer, Conservative MEP for Lutterworth in Lincolnshire. He says:

"In all three major parties, the MEPs are a self-selecting and unrepresentative group.. the Tory MEPs are unrepresentative of the party's views".

So we are not the only party with problems with European representation.

As I was saying, the situation that I was describing did not come about through serendipity; but because of our businesses and workers, and because of the economic framework that we established. We have enjoyed eight years of economic prosperity, but whereas, in the past, overall material success was secured at the expense of greater equality and workplace protection, this Government have coupled industrial success with the introduction of decent civilised minimum standards for employees. Through the 1980s boom, the best-off saw decent pay rises but the poorest faced living standards that were frozen. In recent years, it is incomes at the bottom end that have grown the fastest. The Government have lifted 700,000 children out of relative poverty and have reduced relative pensioner poverty by a quarter, showing that we have not only increased the incomes of the poorest and most vulnerable but helped them to narrow the gap with the better-off.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I do not dispute what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. However, may I invite him, in the name of social progress and joined-up government, to consider the alternative view? Notwithstanding what the Government have done to help people at the bottom of the scale, it remains the fact that the poorest fifth of the population are now paying in tax overall a larger share of their income than any other group. Will he have a word with his right hon. Friend the Chancellor on that point?

Alan Johnson: We have taken millions of low-paid workers out of tax altogether. As a result, statistics show that the poorest paid have increased their earnings by 10 per cent. as against 4 per cent. at the richer end. Dealing with relative poverty is always more difficult than dealing with absolute poverty, because everyone is gaining from the prosperity of the country. Of course, tax is an element of that, which is why the working tax credit, the family tax credit and the child tax credit have been such important parts of our policy.

In 1997, there was no protection for vulnerable workers from exploitative rates of pay. We introduced the national minimum wage against fierce and sustained

opposition in the House and dire warnings of impending job losses. In 1997, a father could see his child born in the evening, but be compelled to go to work the next morning. We introduced paid paternity leave for the first time for British workers. In 1997, a person could be sacked simply because of their sexual orientation. We introduced protection from discrimination in the workplace. In 1997, workers could be made to work for seven days a week every week with no paid holiday. We have given employees four weeks' paid leave guaranteed, and will ensure that bank holidays are not counted against that entitlement.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the recently announced increase in the minimum wage and the fact that it has stopped the exploitation of people? Will he point out to the House how many people protected by the minimum wage are women?

Alan Johnson: I certainly accept my hon. Friend's congratulations. The minimum wage was introduced with great deftness. The Low Pay Commission ensured that its introduction did not lead to a loss of jobs in vulnerable industries, and as a result we have been able to bring the minimum wage up to £5.05 this October and £5.35 next October. Against all the dire predictions and warnings, we ensured that the minimum wage was introduced, and we can still say that people not only have rights at work, but have work to go to where they can exercise those rights. That is a crucial element of our approach.

We introduced the right to membership of a trade union, and equal treatment for part-time employees and those on fixed-term contracts. We have increased paid maternity leave from 18 weeks in 1997 to 26 weeks, with 39 weeks to follow in relation to the Bill announced in the Gracious Speech. We have almost doubled the rate of statutory maternity pay from £60 in 1997 to £106 today.

We have slashed the qualifying period for additional maternity leave from two years to six months, benefiting 350,000 mothers every year. We have given parents of young and disabled children the right to request flexible working. In 2003, adoptive parents, who received no help whatever despite the fact that society is seeking to take children out of institutions and place them with families, became entitled to the same maternity and paternity leave as natural parents.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his new job. He will be aware of the recent employment skills survey, which showed that 10 per cent. of our work force—2.4 million people—lack the basic skills that they need to do their job. With the Rover crisis very present in all our minds, what are the Government going to do to help the people who do not have those basic skills, and what are they going to do to retrain the people who will lose their jobs as a result of the Rover crisis?

Alan Johnson: The fact that we have such a problem with basic literacy and numeracy among many adults is a result of some of the policies that the previous Government pursued between 1979 and 1997. As for how we tackle it, the skills agenda puts business at its centre, instead of Ministers, politicians and academics suggesting that they know what business needs in relation to skills shortages. Our whole approach is to place businesses at the heart of the skills policy through sector skills councils and other measures announced in our skills strategies.

As for Rover workers, an enormous effort is being made. Many companies from around the country want the very skills that Rover workers possess, and at the same time many Rover workers are improving their skills to enhance their employability. That is a crucial part of the way in which we tackle the problems at Longbridge.

John Bercow: The Secretary of State cannot get away with his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown). On the subject of skills, particularly in relation to the teaching of reading, what does the right hon. Gentleman make of the contribution to that debate by three leading and apparently respected experts in the teaching of reading—Kimberley, Meek and Miller—who are on the record as saying:

> "Within the psychosemiotic framework the shared reading lesson is viewed as an ideological construct where events are played out and children must therefore learn to position themselves in three interlocking contexts."

Does he think that helpful, or does he agree that it is precisely that sort of attitude that has done so much to damage the life chances of a generation of kids in state schools?

Alan Johnson: I was reading that soundbite only this morning. As the father of a four-and-a-half-year-old child, I am very interested in the way in which reading is taught in our schools. My point is that we did have a problem, and it is the legacy problem of adults out there who do not have even the basic level of skills that they need—not through any fault of their own but because society has let them down. The entitlement to a level 2 qualification will be an important aspect of dealing with that. I accept that, as well as considering the current generation out there, we need to ensure that future generations do not end up in the same situation.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Before we leave this point, may I add that we cannot just blame society when people at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority are saying that, in the future marking of English, spelling is to account for only four marks in the entire examination, and a person sitting the examination can mis-spell every word in the long writing requirement and not lose a single mark when the results come out? Surely that is something that the Government should stamp on firmly from above.

Alan Johnson: I do not want to become embroiled in an education debate, but let me make it absolutely clear that we are not blaming society—we are blaming the hon. Gentleman's Government.

The days when Britain could be actively marketed by its Government as the sweatshop of Europe are gone for good. We have harnessed work force protection to increased employment, but have done so while also concentrating on tackling climate change. Since 1997, we have experienced significant reductions in air and water pollution, our beaches, rivers and drinking water

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are cleaner than ever, and recycling has taken hold, with household recycling rates up from 7.5 per cent. of household waste in 1997 to 18 per cent. today. We have added an area the size of Liverpool to the green belt, and seen air pollution in urban areas fall by 16 per cent. in the 10 years to 2003.

We have taken radical action to meet the biggest environmental challenge of all: global warming. Britain led the world in introducing the first ever economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme in 2002, taking tough action on the environment by harnessing the power of market forces to protect our planet. We have introduced the climate change levy and the renewable energy programme, both of which were opposed by the Conservative party. We are spending more than £500 million between 2002 and 2008 to help develop emerging renewable and low carbon technologies, in the form of research and development spending and funding for capital grants. We are projected to meet our Kyoto targets to cut greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2012.

Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): With all that the Secretary of State has said, and acknowledging that the Prime Minister attaches great importance to the issue, can the right hon. Gentleman explain to the House why his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs had to reduce the Government's target of a 20 per cent. CO_2 reduction by 2010—

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett) *indicated dissent.*

Michael Jack: Secondly, why have transport emissions continued to rise, seemingly without any brakes being applied by Government policy?

Alan Johnson: I know that the right hon. Gentleman chaired the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in the last Parliament. I am unaware—and my right hon. Friend has just confirmed my impression—that we have made any change to the target of 20 per cent. reduction. In fact, it has been reaffirmed. With regard to transport, the right hon. Gentleman raises an important factor. Transport is an essential element in the reduction of carbon emissions. That does not detract from the changes that have taken place in this country. The Government have every right to be proud of their record, but on the threshold of our historic third term in government, there are new dilemmas and fresh challenges.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): While the Secretary of State is still feeling proud of his record, can he confirm that, in 2002, greenhouse gas emissions were 14.4 per cent. below 1990 levels, but in 2004 they were only 12.6 per cent. below, so greenhouse gas emissions have deteriorated over the past few years?

Alan Johnson: For various reasons that the hon. Gentleman may be aware of, there was an increase over those two years. The party that opposed not just the introduction of the climate change levy—a tough decision, which was also opposed by the Liberal Democrats—but the emissions trading scheme as well, has no right to lecture us on the problems that we face in some aspects of our policies.

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): We propose a carbon tax, which is far more effective in tackling climate change than a climate change levy, which is hopelessly complicated. The Minister faces a real challenge with regard to carbon emissions. As he knows, some of his officials are desperately keen on nuclear power. Does he accept that nuclear power generation through a new wedge of nuclear power stations would be hopelessly uneconomic? It would require a massive influx of taxpayers' money and would choke off money needed for energy efficiency and renewables.

Alan Johnson: No, I do not accept that. What I do accept is that the affordability of waste disposal is as central now as it was in 2003 when we published our energy White Paper. There must be a balanced approach. In the climate change review programme, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I are considering why there was the increase to which the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) referred, and how to get the scheme back on track. We also need to re-examine those matters in the world as we find it now, two years after the White Paper. I am making no commitment, and nor are the Government, to move any further than we intended at the time of the White Paper.

We must accept that the industrial landscape is changing fast. Within a generation, China will challenge the United States as the largest economy in the world. India is producing 3 million highly skilled graduates a year. Ten new central and eastern European democracies, with wage costs a fraction of our own, have joined the EU. Meanwhile, technology and scientific understanding are changing our world faster than ever before.

We cannot, and should not, hold back technological change or compete on low wages and poor working conditions, but we can compete by producing goods with high added value and services that the world wants to buy. So we need sustainable businesses that are responsive to what consumers want and technology makes possible—businesses that fulfil the potential of their employees and reap benefits for all, which employ the brightest and the best regardless of colour, background or creed, and which continue to be responsive to environmental needs and the possibilities of new technology.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): My right hon. Friend mentions sustainable businesses. Given the importance attached by the Prime Minister to implementing our manifesto, which refers to developing a publicly owned Royal Mail, will he rule out the proposals made by Royal Mail boss Allan Leighton to privatise it? Those proposals would mean that, initially, 51 per cent. of shares would be sold off to staff.

Alan Johnson: I trudged the streets as a postman for 13 years, and I found out yesterday that I now own 59,999 shares in Royal Mail. The other one is owned by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. We would both be very reluctant to give them up.

We need to secure international agreement on the science involved in, and urgency of, climate change, and on a new package of measures to tackle it. Climate change threatens our world and endangers the future of our planet. Tackling that awesome threat to our children's future requires sustainable development and the pursuit of environmental goals in a long-term global context. We also need affordable and sustainable energy supplies.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): I hope that the Secretary of State will not conclude his remarks without speaking about Rover, where 20,000 jobs were lost just before the general election. What are his views on the Rover directors, who were not rich men when they took over the company yet who were able to put up £49 million of their own assets in an attempt to help the business? Is he proud of the Government's role in forcing BMW to sell to the Rover directors, who then asset-stripped the company, leaving it in an unviable position, with a pension fund unable to pay its debts?

Alan Johnson: I am visiting the west midlands next Tuesday to meet all the people involved in this matter. The hon. Lady will know that we have asked Sir Brian Nicholson to look into the very points that she has raised, and it would not be helpful for me to comment on the directors before his report is published. However, I was involved in this matter in 2000, when I was a junior Trade and Industry Minister. At that time, the situation was extremely dire. As I recall, hon. Members of all parties wanted the Longbridge plant to remain a going concern. Those who try to rewrite history with the benefit of hindsight should think back to the circumstances of that period. I know that the hon. Lady is very concerned for her constituents, but neither she nor any other hon. Member argued at the time that the Government should reject what seemed a very feasible way to keep 6,000 jobs at Longbridge.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): My constituency and that of the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) cover different parts of the Longbridge plant. She will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that she welcomed the Phoenix takeover of 2000.

Miss Kirkbride *indicated dissent.*

Richard Burden: Well, we shall sort out the relevant quote a little later, or next week. I pay tribute to the Government's speed of reaction to the MG Rover failure. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must do all that we can to ensure that sustainable businesses grow on the Longbridge site, that a technology park is built and everything possible is done to ensure that manufacturing is retained there? Does he agree that clear messages must be sent to the administrators, the local regional development agency and the company that at present owns most of the Longbridge site that we expect them to take account of the needs of the regional economy in the decisions that they are going to make?

Alan Johnson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's involvement in this issue over many years, and I can confirm that so far as I can see, that is the goal of everyone involved in Longbridge, including Advantage West Midlands, local businesses and the task force dealing with supply chain issues. We need to maintain whatever we can of manufacturing, given the strong skills base and the enormous dedication and skills of people in that field. These issues are now with the administrator, who has made it clear that he has not brought down any curtains, as it were. I very much hope that the desires that my hon. Friend has understandably expressed will be implemented in due course.

I turn to the importance of secure and sustainable energy to the future prosperity of the UK, the need for which has never been clearer. Our energy policy will continue to focus on the four goals set out in our energy White Paper of 2003: reducing emissions, maintaining reliable and secure energy supplies, promoting competitive markets, and ensuring that every home is adequately and affordably heated. As I have said, we are on course to meet out Kyoto target, but the climate change programme review already shows that we will need to do even more to meet the stretching goals that we have set out. We will do this while ensuring that we remain focused on our aspiration to ensure that Britain meets the challenges of a transformed industrial world.

I have outlined the environmental and industrial challenges that we face today—

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Before the Secretary of State moves on, will he now admit to the House that carbon dioxide emissions have actually gone up since 1997, and that the only reason why we are anywhere near meeting our Kyoto target is the reduction in the production of adipic acid using a technology that created nitrous oxide? That is hardly a tribute to his energy policy.

Alan Johnson: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position. I can confirm the first part of his question; I shall leave it to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to deal with the second part in her reply.

Britain is well placed to meet the challenges that I have set out. We have many strengths on which to build: world-class universities, a strong tradition of science and research, a dynamic and flexible labour market, and world-class companies steeped in new technologies and high-value added services. But we need to do more. We need to give British business a clear and predictable regulatory framework at domestic level. We will continue to deliver our ambitious approach set out in the DTI five-year programme, in line with the Hampton and Better Regulation Task Force reports, applying risk-based regulation, with a million fewer inspections every year. We will look to apply not only a light touch but a limited touch, regulating only where there is a clear rationale.

We will use our presidency of the EU to press for regulatory reform and liberalisation of the single market, and we will also push towards a stronger transatlantic trade and investment partnership to remove regulatory barriers between the European Union and the USA. At international level, we will continue to work to break down barriers to trade, and to make globalisation work for the many, not the few.

We are investing record amounts in science, skills and innovation and in the technologies of the future. We are putting nearly £400 million into nanotechnology,

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composite materials and bioscience, and £320 million into research and development in other technology areas critical to the future growth of the UK economy. We need to secure a better quality of life through sustainable development, in which technology again has an important role to play. Clean and more resource-efficient technologies can contribute both to a rich and healthy environment and to the goal of decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation.

The Gracious Speech listed some of the measures that we need to implement to meet these challenges. We are determined to simplify our company law framework, and to bring it up to date in line with today's business needs. The company law reform Bill will provide more flexibility for companies and more effective shareholder engagement. It will bring deregulatory benefits of some £250 million a year, including £100 million for small companies. We are determined to make our markets fair, transparent, competitive and fit for the 21st century. The Consumer Credit Bill represents the most important reform of this crucial market for 30 years, enhancing consumer rights and redress.

We are determined to ensure that everyone in our country can reach their full potential and to tackle the root causes of discrimination and promote human rights and social progress. The Equality Bill will establish a single commission for equality and human rights to deal with all aspects of discrimination. It will also create a duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

We are determined to give more choice to families to manage their work and caring responsibilities. The work and families Bill will extend paid maternity leave to 39 weeks, and it may be used to extend the successful right to request flexible working to other people with caring responsibilities and enable mothers to transfer some of their leave and pay to fathers.

We are also determined to support rural services. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill will create a single organisation, natural England, as a powerful champion for landscape and conservation, giving those who manage the land easier access to funding, support and advice. It will formally establish the commission for rural communities to act as an advocate and watchdog for rural communities and to ensure that Government policy delivers real improvements for them.

We are determined to protect common land, an important part of our natural heritage valued for agriculture, recreation, landscape and nature conservation. The common land Bill will modernise and simplify outdated legislation so that commons can be managed sustainably. It will help protect valuable wildlife habitats, improve public access and correct wrongly registered land. It will streamline the consent system for works and fencing, so that we remove barriers to good land management.

Changes across the world are throwing up new challenges for both the environment and industry. We have delivered rising prosperity and will continue to do so, but we know that if we are to secure that without damaging the environment beyond repair, we must get more for less—more consumer needs fulfilled with less energy output and more value added to a product with less pollution and waste. The Gracious Speech shows our determination to ensure prosperity for generations to come. The measures that the Government are introducing will build on the foundation that we have laid over the past eight years and ensure that we live in a fairer society, and one that is more cohesive and less fractured than it was in 1997.

I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

11.42 am

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Member's Interests.

I welcome the Secretary of State to his new Department. In fact, I congratulate him on one of the more memorable entrances to a new Department in Whitehall. He will be hard pressed to do anything quite as dramatic as he did in his first week in a great Department, whose origins are lost in the mist of time but may perhaps go back to a week last Friday.

Last week began with an announcement from No. 10 of a new Department for Productivity, Energy and Industry. That, it was said, was the strategic title, and it was created so that the new Department would be "refocused and reinvigorated". We all know that language. It is authentic John Birt. It is Birt-speak. I must say that I prefer Prescott-speak. The Deputy Prime Minister puts things so much better; as he said during the general election:

"First of all, let's dismiss John bloody Birt."

Perhaps the Secretary of State agrees with him.

"He might walk in and out of ... No. 10. He might whisper in ... ears. There are thousands of advisers like him."

By the end of last week, the Secretary of State had a fiasco on his hands: nobody could take the new title of his Department seriously. The Institute of Directors described it as a circus. The Secretary of State, to his credit, announced a climbdown: it had all been a dreadful error. It ended up where all the best errors end up—in the marvellous corrections column of *The Guardian* on Saturday, alongside miscellaneous misprints and mistakes. *The Guardian* carried a correction reading:

"Today's *Jobs & Money* carries a number of references to the week-old Department for Productivity, Energy and Industry ... Unfortunately, the section went to print just hours before the department decided to revert to its former name, the Department of Trade and Industry".

So there we have it: from grand strategy to the misprint section of *The Guardian* in less than seven days. That is what the Secretary of State has delivered.

What was the Secretary of State up to during the week in which his Department was the Department with the name that we have now all forgotten? Perhaps he spent his time trying to produce a decent acronym for the new Department. The Department of Productivity, Energy and Industry, or DOPEI? No, it could not be that. The Department of Industry, Productivity and Energy, or DIPE? No, it could not be that. There were others, with which I shall not detain the House, other than to say that the whole episode was an almighty cock-up.

Meanwhile, at the same time as this Whitehall farce was going on, something much more significant was going on in Brussels. The European Parliament voted

against our opt-out from the working time directive. This recognises the right of individuals—consenting adults—to work for more than 48 hours a week if they wish. Two million British workers take advantage of that right, which was secured by a Conservative Government.

The Secretary of State says that he recognises the need for the opt-out and the danger of what the European Parliament has voted for, but if he believes that this is so dangerous, he should have been on the phone morning, noon and night to try to prevent his own Members of the European Parliament from voting to get rid of the opt-out. So, was he on the phone trying to persuade them? If not, why not? If he did try to persuade them, why on earth was he so unsuccessful? Not a single Labour MEP voted to support the Government's position of protecting the opt-out. Is it not an indication of a Government who, so soon after their election victory, are already losing their authority if they cannot get a single Labour MEP to vote for the Prime Minister's official position?

Conservative Members believe that there is a legitimate and important role for the Department. It should be strengthening the supply side of the British economy. The Government talk proudly—we heard this again from the Secretary of State today—of the macro-economic stability that our country has enjoyed since 1992, but that is not the end of the story, as surely it should be macro-economic stability with a purpose. What we need is some vision and bravery, showing what we can do to make the British economy more successful and more competitive.

That should be something that all of us on both sides of the House work towards, but I must say to the Secretary of State that his speech was appallingly complacent about the state of the real economy: it is hurting out there and there are significant economic problems. Those of us who have been returned once more as Members of Parliament and those who are newly arrived with, we hope, four or five years ahead of them as Members of the House should remember the business people, the workers and the retailers who are worried about their future and can have no such confidence in what the future holds for them.

Andrew Miller: The hon. Gentleman is aware that my constituency is a significant manufacturing centre. As such, recent investments have benefited from regional selective assistance. Is it still his party's position that it wants to scrap RSA, or was the language used in the election about Rover just language of convenience for electoral gain?

Mr. Willetts: I shall be reviewing all our policies affecting the Department of Trade and Industry, and we want public money to be spent efficiently and effectively. The hon. Gentleman talks about his manufacturing constituency. I, too, represent a manufacturing constituency, and I remind him and the House that we have just seen the biggest slump in manufacturing output for a decade. It fell by 1.6 per cent. in March, so what we have seen here, as elsewhere, is evidence of the problems facing the British economy. We have a fall in manufacturing output, record trade deficits and a Chancellor who, we heard at the CBI dinner earlier this week, is already preparing his alibis for British economic performance not being what he forecast.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): My hon. Friend refers to manufacturing. The fall that he highlights is both accurate and depressing, but will he turn his attention to the deep concern felt in the retail sector, where there has been a dramatic slump? What is his view on that?

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is right. The statistics across the piece show an economic slowdown, and it was conspicuous that, at the CBI on Tuesday, the Chancellor failed to endorse his own pre-election forecasts for the growth of the British economy.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman spoke about the biggest drop in manufacturing for a decade. Obviously, that takes us back to a period of Conservative government. Will he acknowledge that, in the early 1990s—1992, I think—there was a 5 per cent. drop in manufacturing output, directly as a result of his Government's policies?

Mr. Willetts: If one looks at manufacturing and manufacturing employment overall, one sees that, under this Government since 1997, the number of manufacturing jobs has fallen by much more than during the previous period. The figure is an easily memorable 999,000, which indicates the scale of the problem.

Let me turn to the heart of the problem of our economic performance. We need to tackle the challenge of raising Britain's productivity. I was pleased by the reference to productivity that appeared, briefly, in the title of the Department. Let me remind the Secretary of State of some of the targets that the Government have set for productivity and their performance against those targets.

The public service agreements of July 2000 included a commitment to improve UK competitiveness

"by narrowing the productivity gap with the US, France, Germany and Japan."

Two years later, in July 2002, there was a commitment to

"demonstrate progress by 2006 on the Government's long-term objective of raising the rate of UK productivity growth".

As recently as July 2004, there was a commitment to demonstrate further progress by 2008—they always slip the target date back a bit—on the Government's long-term objective of raising the rate of UK productivity growth.

That is what the Government said, but what has happened? In the first seven and a half years of the Labour Government, output per worker grew at an average rate of 1.69 per cent. In the previous seven and a half years, under the Conservatives, it grew at an annual average rate of 2.36 per cent. Performance has deteriorated. During the first seven and a half years of the Labour Government, output per hour grew at an average rate of 2.1 per cent. During the equivalent period under the Conservatives output per hour grew at an average annual rate of 2.33 per cent. We are not seeing progress or the achievement of the targets that

[Mr. Willetts]

this Government set themselves; far from it. Sadly, we are seeing a decline in performance compared with previous periods.

Michael Jack: Did my hon. Friend notice the Secretary of State trying to position the United Kingdom economy by saying that, in some way, we had beaten Germany and that, in terms of the size of the economy, we were ahead of France? He neatly slid past the fact that, in spite of the way in which the French run their economy, French productivity was greater than ours. Would my hon. Friend care to comment on that omission from the Secretary of State's observations?

Mr. Willetts: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. The British economy's productivity performance has barely matched that of the sclerotic economies of euroland and we have been lagging behind all the other advanced western economies.

John Bercow: My hon. Friend referred to a missed public service agreement target, the significance of which ought to be forcefully underlined. Does he agree that for a Government to fail to meet targets set by independent experts would be disappointing, but for the Government to fail to meet the targets that they have set for themselves requires incompetence on a truly spectacular scale?

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is right, and Conservative Members will continue to hold the Government to account for their performance alongside the targets that they have, as my hon. Friend points out, set themselves.

Let me turn to the reasons for the failure to improve our productivity performance and our competitiveness, one of which is the increased burden of regulation on British business. Does the Secretary of State agree that by far the biggest complaint that one hears from British business, especially small business, is the sheer costs of compliance with the ever greater flow of regulations and burdens from the Government?

Since 1997—we should record this as we are debating the Queen's Speech and considering yet further legislation—the Government have produced no fewer than 315 Acts of Parliament—quite a lot of law for people to be getting on with. We have now reached the absurd position where, in the Queen's Speech this week, we have proposals to legislate to reduce the amount of legislation. Legislation is to be introduced to streamline regulatory structures and to make it simpler to remove outdated or unnecessary legislation. Legislation to remove legislation and a new quango to cut bureaucracy; that is what the Government offer us. We will be scrutinising very hard the Secretary of State's proposals on regulation to see whether he can live up to his promises.

I also warn the Secretary of State of something else that concerns Conservative Members emerging from the election campaign: the growing problem of tough questions that are ruled out during the campaign, excluded from discussion by the Government and fail to appear in their manifesto, but which suddenly and miraculously appear on the policy agenda within days of their re-election. Call me old fashioned, but I thought the idea was that one put one's policy proposals before the electorate to fight an election on them, rather than trying to get re-elected first and then deciding what the policies should be.

The Secretary of State has examples of that in his own Department. On the Post Office, does he stand by the statement in the Labour manifesto that the Government's

"ambition is to see a publicly owned Royal Mail fully restored to good health, providing customers with excellent services and its employees with rewarding employment"?

Or is it true—as it has since been reported—that

"workers could be given shares in the postal operator in a 'John Lewis'-style ownership structure"?

We in the House of Commons are entitled to know whether he stands by the statements made in the Labour manifesto or not.

On energy, the Secretary of State and his colleagues studiously avoided talking about the energy crisis during the election. However, we know from a leaked memorandum that one of his officials has already written to him, calling for a speedy decision on whether to build more nuclear facilities. She said:

"The case for looking at the nuclear question again quickly is that if we want to avoid a very sharp fall in nuclear's contribution to energy supplies (some fall is certain and has already begun), we should need to act soon given the long lead times . . . in getting a new nuclear station up and running."

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has received that advice and, as it has now appeared in the public prints, will he put a full copy in the Library?

Let me put a further point to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is sitting beside the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, because the minute refers to her. It states:

"Because Beckett opposes nuclear new build, the review has not so far considered whether nuclear should contribute to cutting emissions."

We would like to know whether that remains the Secretary of State's view, and the Government's position on nuclear power.

Norman Baker: I entirely agree with the proposition that parties should make clear their intentions before the election. Will the hon. Gentleman therefore explain why, when I challenged the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on nuclear power, he replied that the Conservatives would make up their minds in the year after the election?

Mr. Willetts: I am pressing the Government for a clear statement on not only their policy but the way in which they will reach an urgent decision. Conservative Members recognise that there are difficult questions and that nuclear power has to be evaluated carefully as an option. We do not say that we or the Government should make that decision today, but we believe that a clear timetable needs to be set for reaching a decision urgently because of the scale of the energy crisis. We face a significant problem of securing proper energy supplies for our economy, looking forward five or 10 years. I had hoped not for a final decision on whether the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry would go nuclear, but at

least for an indication of the time scale in which such a decision would be made, so that people know where they stand.

There are other proposals before the House in the Queen's Speech debate. We shall scrutinise them carefully and not oppose them for the sake of it. We shall be constructive if we can, offer broad support for the Consumer Credit Bill and company law reform, and view the Equalities Bill positively. However, let me press the Secretary of State a little more about equality, because we are in a strange position after the reshuffle. There is in his Department a women's Minister who was not in the original full list of appointments, but added later. Since the Government have already reached their full complement of Ministers, she receives no pay as the new Minister for Women. Indeed, the only woman in the Secretary of State's ministerial team is not paid at all. I therefore remind him of his Department's objectives, which are set out in the Department's public service agreement targets.

The document states:

"Objective V: Working to deliver equality and to maximise potential in the workplace.

By . . . working with other departments,"

we will

"bring about measurable improvements in gender equality across a range of indicators".

That is what the Government signed up to, but they cannot even get around to paying their Minister for Women as a Minister.

The Government say that they are committed to equal pay. In their assessment of their progress on equal pay, they say that they are "on course" to achieve it. The Secretary of State may claim that he is on course to achieve equal pay, but he cannot even deliver equal pay in his Department for his Minister for Women. If he cannot do that, how on earth can we trust him to take seriously the commitments into which he has entered for the economy as a whole?

Does not that tell us everything we need to know about the Government? They make grandiose commitments, many pledges and grand promises, but completely fail to deliver. Conservative Members stand for a flexible and successful economy in a strong society. We will fight for that as we debate and scrutinise the Queen's Speech and beyond.

12.3 pm

Kitty Ussher (Burnley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in the new Parliament and so early in this debate. I understand from the Whips that the deal for being called so early is that I must name my forthcoming offspring after you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, as a new Member, I must do exactly as you say, even if it is a girl.

It seemed appropriate to speak during the industry and environment debate since my constituency of Burnley is famed for its industrial legacy and its natural surrounding beauty. Burnley, along with other Lancashire mill towns, was the powerhouse of the industrial revolution. We wove the cloth for export that created the wealth that sustained an empire. That legacy is there for all to see: the town is criss-crossed by canals, with mill towers soaring high above in every direction that one looks.

Over the years, as the textile trade declined, mining and manufacturing took over. Although the pits have now closed, I am proud, as a member of Amicus, to say that we remain strong in manufacturing, especially in the aerospace and automotive industries, with companies such as Hurel Hispano, Gardner Aerospace, Futaba Tenneco, Smiths and TRW employing many thousands of my constituents. In the proud market town of Padiham, Baxi Potterton makes the household boilers and fires that many hon. Members will have in their homes.

The experience of my constituency shows that, in Britain, we can succeed in manufacturing in the 21st century but that that requires investment in skills, science and technology. I therefore applaud the Government's commitment to increasing the number of manufacturing and modern apprentices, to ratcheting up science spending and their target of 2.5 per cent. of national income to be spent on research and development.

My part of the world is not all dark satanic mills, as my hon. Friend the Member for neighbouring Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson) will testify. The countryside dominates Burnley, whichever way one looks. It nestles in a valley, with the imposing shadow of Pendle hill, with its legends of witches and visions, on one side, and, on the other, the beautiful villages of Worsthorne—where my stepfather's family originates—and Cliviger, which climb up into the Pennines. I am blessed to represent a truly beautiful part of the world and my husband and I have no greater pleasure at weekends than leaving our front door and setting off into the hills for a day's walk.

It is customary on such occasions to pay tribute to one's predecessor and, for me, that is easy to do because Peter Pike served the town so well in the 22 years that he was Burnley's Member of Parliament. He decided on his vocation at an early age. He was evacuated to Burnley as a child during the second world war and decided then that he wanted to be the town's Member of Parliament. Returning as an adult, he worked in the Mullards factory, where he swiftly gained a reputation as an effective shop steward and was also agent for the then Member of Parliament for Burnley, Dan Jones, who, of course, was the father of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor).

Peter fulfilled his childhood ambition when he followed Dan Jones into Parliament in 1983. He said at the time that he would do his best for the people of Burnley—a promise that he certainly kept. He has a special place in the hearts of Burnley people and his local reputation as a hard-working Member of Parliament is second to none.

As hon. Members know, his reputation as a hard-working Member of Parliament applies equally to his time in Parliament. In the sheer number of questions asked and votes attended or in his prodigious Committee and all-party work, there is no doubt that Peter leaves behind him an honourable reputation as an experienced and senior parliamentarian.

Labour colleagues owe Peter their particular thanks for the policy work that he undertook in the early 1990s as our spokesperson, first on rural affairs and then on environment and housing, and especially for his policy

[Kitty Ussher]

document, "The Rural Dimension", which put forward positive proposals to protect countryside communities, many of which have since been implemented.

For me, it has been a great pleasure to work alongside Peter in the past 15 months since I was selected. I should like to put on record my thanks for the time that he gave me. I especially learned from the stories that Peter told me about his experiences of being Member of Parliament for Burnley for 22 years the difference that a Labour Government have made to constituencies such as mine. Under the Conservatives, Peter had to fight for the cash to repair leaky school roofs and toilets and to get adequate textbooks for our children. Now, under Labour, I am happy to say that we have £150 million of Government money earmarked for building five fantastic state-of-the-art new secondary schools from scratch under the building schools for the future programme.

Under the Conservatives, Peter brought housing Minister after housing Minister to look at the state of our run-down mill terraces. Promises were made to do something about it and they were all broken. Now, under Labour, millions of pounds have been earmarked and are already being spent on regenerating our housing under the Elevate programme for east Lancashire, with more money on the way.

Under the Conservatives, health care in Burnley suffered. Three hospitals—Bank Hall, Marsden and Victoria—were closed. Dentists started to leave the national health service. Under Labour, we are building a new health and recreation centre, including eight new NHS dental suites; Burnley General hospital is being refurbished and expanded under a successful private finance initiative project; waiting lists are down, and deaths locally from heart disease and cancer are falling. If we add to all that the fact that unemployment is now at its lowest for a generation and that poverty in childhood and old age is falling, the inescapable conclusion is that constituencies such as mine need a Labour Government in order to succeed.

My vision for Burnley is that of a town that is as excited and confident about what it can be in the future as it is rightly proud of its industrial past. There is much that can be done before that can happen, but all the experience of the past few decades has shown that it is more likely to happen under a Labour Government than any other. So, today, I want to take the next step along that path by renewing the pledge made by my predecessor. I promise to do my very best for the people of Burnley. I thank them for the trust that they have put in me, and I thank the House for the courtesy that it has shown in listening to my speech today.

12.10 pm

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Burnley (Kitty Ussher) on an excellent maiden speech. She was eloquent and cohesive, and showed a real commitment to her constituency. I am sure that she will be an excellent Member of Parliament. I do not, however, think that she should be obliged to name her child after you, Mr. Speaker, no matter how elegant you are, not least because the child's sex might be inconvenient for that purpose. I am reminded of the fact that, when I became a father, I was dealing with legislation on energy on behalf of my party. The then Minister, Helen Liddell, suggested that I should name my daughter Neta, after the new electricity trading arrangements. That was not an option that I wanted to pursue, but I was grateful for the suggestion nevertheless.

I also congratulate the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on his elevation. I think that it represents a promotion, although the Department of Trade and Industry might seem a poisoned chalice to some. It is known as the "Department of Timidity and Inaction" in *Private Eye*; it remains to be seen whether that will be the case under his tutelage. I also genuinely welcome the fact that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs remains in post. She shows an understanding and commitment to important issues such as climate change, and I am very pleased that she has not been reshuffled, or worse.

That leads me to the main issue that I want to raise today: climate change. I make no apologies for doing so, because it is the most serious issue that we face. That is not a view that I alone hold; it is shared by many people, including the Prime Minister—according to his own words—and the Government's chief scientist, Sir David King. It is therefore a great pity that the subject barely featured in the election campaign. As far as I am aware, no press conferences were held by either the Conservative or Labour parties on the subject, and the issue was not reported by the broadcast or written media in any major shape or form during the election period.

The Liberal Democrats held a press conference on the environment, which I attended with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy), where we raised the subject of climate change. When we did so, however, we were challenged by a reputable BBC journalist, who asked why we were not talking about serious issues such as immigration. We have a long way to go to educate some of our media friends on the importance of climate change, and to ensure that it has a proper profile in the House.

During the last Parliament, there were four substantive debates on climate change. Three took place during the very limited Opposition time afforded to the Liberal Democrats, which shows our commitment to this issue during the last Parliament. The other took place in Government time. There was to be one in Conservative time, but the subject of that debate was changed at the last minute to one that attacked wind farms. We did not therefore have the opportunity to discuss climate change on that occasion, but I hope that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who has now taken over responsibility for these issues on behalf of the Conservatives, will do rather better than that in his negotiations with his colleagues on the allocation of Conservative time for debates. He is an affable chap, and well liked in House, but I understand from the press coverage that he sees a move to the environment portfolio as a chance to take his foot off the pedal a little, and that his new responsibility is not so important as the big job that he had shadowing the Treasury. I hope that that is not really his view, because consideration of climate change should not allow anyone to take their foot off the pedal. It requires the diligence and application that I know he can deliver, and I look forward to hearing his speech later in the debate.

Climate change was the dog that did not bark during the election campaign. One reason for that could be the media's approach, to which I have already referred. Another could be the Government's record on climate change. They regularly make all the appropriate noises, drawing attention to the need to take action, but the action itself is often not forthcoming. When it is forthcoming, it sometimes does not work very well. The Government's record on climate change, in relation to the domestic indicators that they themselves cite in support of their case, is not one of which they should be terribly proud.

I congratulate the Prime Minister on making climate change a priority during our presidency of the EU, and on the work that he has put in, with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, among others, during the G8 process. That is very welcome, but to convince other countries of the need to take climate change seriously, we need to ensure that our own house is in order. Quite clearly, in many ways, it is not.

The UK's domestic record leaves a lot to be desired. We have already heard Members referring to the fact that carbon emissions have gone up since 1997, and that we are in danger of missing our Kyoto target. The Government say that we are in line to reach that target, but we are not. We are actually moving backwards in that regard and, unless the Government put in place some serious policy levers now, there is a real danger of our missing the target. The only reason that we are anywhere near it is because of what happened during the Conservative years. Before the Conservatives assume that I am praising them for their contribution, however, I should point out that there was a big cut in carbon emissions at that time because they smashed the coal industry. I do not think that carbon emissions were uppermost in their minds when that decision was followed through by successive Conservative Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry.

The UK's domestic record is not good—carbon emissions are up; energy consumption is up 7 per cent. since 1997; renewables, to which the Government are committed, produce less than 4 per cent. of the UK's domestic electricity; and car and traffic generation—in terms of mileage—is running out of control. The Government's transport policy is equivalent to a car going down a hill with the handbrake off, and there seems to be no way of arresting that movement. We are also seeing a big growth in carbon emissions from road traffic, and road traffic is forecast to increase by up to 25 per cent. by 2010. That is an enormous increase, and the Government seem to be adopting a "predict and provide" policy to accommodate it, rather than trying to arrest it. Aviation emissions are also out of control, with a projected increase of 83 per cent. by 2020.

The Government must face up to these, their own serious indicators, and take action to try to arrest them and to change direction. The time for fine speeches from the Prime Minister and others is over. In this Parliament, we want to see proper policy mechanisms put in place that will lead to an improvement. The time to do that is at the beginning of a Parliament that will run for four or five years. I accept that, as a natural political response, the Government might have been concerned about the electoral implications of doing that, but the election is now out of the way, and they have a chance to get this right. I hope that they will do so in the months ahead. If they do, they will have the support of the Liberal Democrats.

In moving forward on the Kyoto agreement and on greenhouse gasses, we also need to persuade other countries to take the necessary action. It is disappointing that the increase in carbon emissions in some European Union countries is even worse than that of the United States. We need rigour at EU level to ensure that action is taken by all countries—including the Spains and Portugals of this world—to decrease their emissions. I hope that, when the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs responds to the debate, she will give the House a flavour of the techniques and tactics that the British Government will use to persuade other European Union countries to cut their emissions.

The Secretary of State recognises the need to bring India, China and Brazil on board in this regard—the projected increase in emissions from those countries is enormous—and that involves extremely difficult diplomacy. I understand that, but I would say to her that it is made more difficult by European Union countries and the United States roaring ahead with increases in their carbon emissions. It is difficult to argue with India, China and Brazil that they should cut their emissions when the developed world is performing so badly.

Doubtless, some people will accuse me of being anti-American, but I want to make it plain that I am not anti-American. I am anti-Bush, which is not the same thing at all. That is an important distinction. What is happening in America is, in some ways, very good, because a lot of progress is being made, although not by the Bush Administration. Steps are being taken by individual north-eastern states to shadow the EU's very sensible emissions trading policy. Schwarzenegger is making good progress. Some American states are attempting effectively to shadow Kyoto. There is a commitment in those individual states, and there is a commitment in American industry, which now recognises the opportunities for business to tackle climate change. There is also a commitment among the American population in many instances. There is, however, no commitment on the part of the Bush Administration.

It was frightening to read a press report of what the White House said a couple of days ago. Apparently George Bush's top economic adviser, Allan Hubbard, said that he wanted to get the oil price back to $25 a barrel. It is now over $50 a barrel. Allan Hubbard is living in cloud cuckoo land. He must understand that the oil price has gone up, and is unlikely to fall much, if at all. America seems to think that it can exploit Alaska, that it can find resources from elsewhere, that it can put pressure on Saudi Arabia, but that is not going to work, and the sooner the American Administration wake up to the fact the better.

Damian Green: I share some of the hon. Gentleman's views on the current American Administration's environment policy, but I think he is being unnecessarily partisan. I distinctly remember that the Clinton

[Damian Green]

Administration made absolutely no effort to push Kyoto through in America. It has been a problem for successive American federal Governments.

Norman Baker: I certainly accept the argument that the Clinton Administration did not do enough—although they did indicate a willingness to sign up to Kyoto, on which Bush reneged as soon as he came to power. There may have been no substantive difference, in terms of delivery, but there has been a difference in tone. The American Administration need to be moved forward further than they have moved so far.

John Bercow: Further to what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) just said, does the hon. Gentleman agree that a more cogent criticism of successive US Administrations might relate to trade policy? Does he agree that it is both morally wrong and economically damaging for the United States, while preaching free enterprise, to practise protectionism by giving a subsidy of between $3 billion and $4 billion a year to 25,000 relatively well-off and politically influential—and inefficient—cotton producers, thus massively damaging Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad, which depend on cotton for 30 to 40 per cent. of their export earnings?

Norman Baker: I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman back in Parliament.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend's constituency was not one of the Liberal Democrats' targets.

Norman Baker: That is true. I confess it readily. But I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman back, and he has made a fair point. It is tangential to the point I am making, but it is relevant to the need for a consistent approach to a range of issues on the part of the United States. The European Union, too, is far from blameless when it comes to trade policy.

Nuclear power, apparently, is an issue that will occupy us over the next 12 months or so. Some Liberal Democrats tried to interest the House and the wider public in the issue during the 12 months preceding the election. As the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) suggested, it might have been more honest for us to have the debate at that point. There are now a number of policies, but the Liberal Democrat policy is absolutely clear: nuclear power has no role in the future energy supply of this country, for a couple of very sound reasons.

First, there is no solution to the problem of nuclear waste, which covers an enormous acreage. There is now enough nuclear waste to fill five Albert halls, and it is increasing all the time. Apparently, the DTI wants to import some to try and please the Treasury by making the nuclear bills look smaller. The Committee on Radioactive Waste Management has not yet even reported on what should happen to the waste, but we are going to have a debate on nuclear power.

The other reason is financial. Nuclear power is hopelessly uneconomic. We were told in the 1950s that it was too cheap to meter; we have just signed off an energy bill of £48 billion—£800 per man, woman and child in the country—to deal with the mess that we already have, let alone anything else. Time and again, the nuclear industry has said, "This is a new generation: it will be all right." Time and again, it has turned out to be horribly expensive. No private sector company will build nuclear power stations, so the only option is for the taxpayer to pay. The Liberal Democrats will not countenance that.

We have two policies from the Government. At least we have two from them; we have none from the Conservatives. Over the years, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has wisely opposed a further increase in nuclear power generation. Others—including the Prime Minister and perhaps the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, judging by his comments in the *Financial Times* the other day—apparently think that nuclear power may have a role. Let me put to the Secretary of State a point that I made earlier in an intervention. If we have nuclear power, the cost will be so enormous that the taxpayer will have to pick up the bill. That will choke off funds for renewables and energy efficiency, which are far more desirable for the delivery of our energy mix. I hope that the Secretary of State will not be hoodwinked by people in his Department, many of whom seem to be very keen on nuclear power without much basis for being so.

Michael Jack: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, with the advent of the Nuclear Decommissioning Agency, a way will be found of dealing with the materials already in existence at Sellafield? Does he discount the Finnish experience of a deep but recoverable repository, which is currently in operation? Does that not demonstrate that there can be safe and workable solutions to the problem of long-term disposal of nuclear waste?

Norman Baker: I do not accept that there are necessarily any long-term solutions. What I do accept is the Brundtland principle that the environment we leave to future generations should be in as good a condition, or a better condition, than the environment we inherited. If we are to build up stocks of nuclear waste which, in some instances, will last for thousands of years, that test will clearly not be met. For 10 years, Nirex has been trying to find a repository, or some other way of dealing with nuclear waste. The right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) ruled out one possible answer when he was Secretary of State for the Environment, and no progress has been made in the 10 years since then. I suggest that if it were that easy to find a solution, one would have been found by now.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us what is the Liberal Democrat policy on nuclear fusion, as distinct from fission?

Norman Baker: That is something of a side issue, but I shall try to deal with it. [HON. MEMBERS: "It is not a side issue."] It is, and I shall explain why. For many years, we have been spending millions of pounds on nuclear fusion. I am reminded of the boffins who used to appear "The Avengers", appropriating public money without producing much of a return. I do not rule out a role for nuclear fusion at some distant date, but I am very concerned about our continuing to plough large

amounts of money into it when the money could be spent on energy efficiency and renewables, which are far more effective. That represents another diversion of public funds from something that is certain to deliver to something that may never deliver.

Let us consider some of the alternatives. Energy efficiency is a poor relation of energy policy in this country—partly, I suspect, because responsibilities have been split between the DTI and DEFRA. DEFRA has been trying to stop the production of energy, while the DTI has been happy to produce as much as the market wants in a gung-ho way. That division of departmental responsibilities is unhelpful, and I think it is one of the reasons why energy efficiency has not been given the attention that it deserves.

It is perfectly possible to cut energy consumption by 1 per cent. per year over the next 30 years without doing any damage to industry. According to evidence from BP and other companies, investing in energy efficiency means ending up with bigger bottom-line profits. I commend the work of the Carbon Trust, which demonstrated how much better off business is when it cuts energy consumption, with no effect on productivity. Energy efficiency is a win-win process, and more should be done on that front.

We also need to do more about renewables. The Minister will be aware of this morning's report from the Sustainable Development Commission, which drew attention to the need for further action on wind power. As I said earlier, the Conservatives initiated a debate attacking wind power, which was very unfortunate. Wind power is not, of course, the only renewable energy source; we need a mix including tidal power, wave power and micro-generation. It is, however, an important element, and is first in line when it comes to what can be achieved quickly.

Damian Green: While he is extolling the virtues of wind power, would the hon. Gentleman care to list the number of wind power schemes that local Liberal Democrats have opposed over the years? Will he commit himself to ensuring that, for as long as he is the Liberal Democrats' environment spokesman, they will stop opposing such schemes every time they see some political advantage in doing so?

Norman Baker: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is giving a commitment that no Conservative council will follow a particular line and that Conservative Front Benchers will determine the actions of every council up and down the country. Our position is perfectly plain. We have a presumption in favour of wind power, both onshore and offshore, but of course not every site is appropriate. Of course, there are areas where wind—*[Interruption.]* I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, if he is in favour of nuclear power, that every nuclear power station, wherever it is proposed it be built, should be built, or that every site suggested for nuclear waste is appropriate for nuclear waste. We look at the matter on a case-by-case basis. If he wants to know Conservative policy, let me refer him to the comments of his former colleague, Tim Eggar, when Minister for Energy under the last Tory Government, who said:

"I have no plans to constrain any future non-fossil fuel obligation orders for wind energy by either wind speed or geographic location."—[*Official Report*, 16 November 1992, vol. 214, c. 69W.]

Therefore, it appears that the Conservatives do want wind farms all over the country, irrespective of local need. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can confirm that that is still their policy.

As well as looking at renewable energy, of which there are many variations, we need to look at clean coal technology and to identify its potential benefits. By retrofitting our power stations, it is possible to cut carbon emissions by up to 12 or 15 per cent. That will not be without a cost but it should not be forgotten that we can clean up coal to some extent. New coal-fired power stations are coming on stream in China and everywhere else. One of the best things we can do is develop technology to reduce carbon emissions from those sources. If we do that, that will contribute far more to tackling climate change than a couple of windmills here and there. We should not, therefore, ignore the role of coal globally and, for indigenous reasons, in this country. There is the potential to clean up coal and that possibility should not be neglected.

I suggest that the Government look seriously—I am sure that they are doing so—at carbon sequestration. The Minister will know that some of the pressure groups are unhappy about that because they think that it encourages indefinite reliance on fossil fuels, but, given the current position, it would be irresponsible not to consider it. I would welcome a statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs later to confirm the Government's position on that, what steps they are taking to invest in carbon sequestration and what potential they see for oceanic sequestration.

May I express a concern? I understand that there is no marine Bill in the Queen's Speech.

The Minister for Climate Change and the Environment (Mr. Elliot Morley): A draft Bill.

Norman Baker: There is a draft Bill. We have had proposals for many years on the marine environment, and Ministers will know that there is strong support on both sides of the House for marine legislation. We are sorry that the Bill that the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) introduced on the issue was stymied by Conservative peers in the House of Lords, but there is overwhelming support in this House across all three parties for a marine Bill. I hope that the Government will bring that forward sooner rather than later.

I sincerely hope that climate change will feature in mainstream debates initiated by the Government in this Parliament. We are happy to use our limited Opposition time to have those debates but, given the seriousness of the challenge we face, it is not acceptable for the issue to be relegated to discussion in our time. We want major debates in Government time on climate change. A commitment to that from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would be welcome.

12.32 pm

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I can say unequivocally that I agree with the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) on one point: his observation about the first-rate maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Kitty Ussher).

[Andrew Miller]

Having worked with her before, I know that she will be an asset not just to the House but to the people of Burnley. She has a hard act to follow: Peter Pike was a great Member of Parliament and a great advocate for his community. As she rightly said, he did a first-rate job as Labour shadow spokesman on rural affairs.

I will let one secret out of the bag. Peter visited my constituency in that capacity when I was a candidate in 1992. We visited my veterinary school, Leahurst—one of the great veterinary schools and part of Liverpool university. We found ourselves being photographed with a sheep. There was a great argument with the photographer about where Peter and I should stand and about the caption that might end up on the photograph. What made it particularly difficult was that it was a French sheep that came from Yorkshire for infertility treatment at the hospital, but the photographer was sensible about the way it was reported. Peter is a great man. He was a great contributor to the House and I know that my hon. Friend will work hard to follow in his footsteps.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who has had a remarkable career. I do not suppose that he imagined in 1968, when he first became a postman in London, that some years later he would be here as the principal shareholder in the Post Office. He pointed out that the Chancellor has one share, but he has about 50,000. That is a remarkable transformation.

When the Secretary of State convenes his shareholders' meeting and summons the chief officers of the Post Office to meet him, I suggest that he looks carefully at the file that I left with the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), who previously had responsibility for the Post Office, about the way in which two sub-post offices were closed in my constituency. I thought that management's handling of the social implications of that were very poor. Given the Secretary of State's real commitment to working to meet the needs of people in disadvantaged communities, I hope that he will review the way in which some of those actions were taken. I hope that we will find a better way forward.

I know that the Secretary of State will take seriously the important contribution that the DTI has made in promoting world-beating science. Effective innovation is central to the continued competitiveness of the United Kingdom. A perfectly fair question was raised by the Opposition in business questions about the need to have better science debates in this House, given that the Minister for Science and Innovation, Lord Sainsbury, is in the other place. He has made a remarkable contribution to Britain's science policy. We need to find ways to promote debates in this House about the way in which the Government intend to continue to champion science and innovation through innovative technologies, not going down the path of proposed cuts that we have heard from the Conservative party, or indeed the somewhat luddite anti-science policy that we have just heard from the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

Norman Baker: We are not anti-science. We are anti-nuclear.

Andrew Miller: The idea that cutting back fusion research is not an attack on the foundation of Britain's scientific base is absurd. The Liberal Democrats are promoting an anti-science policy. Britain's scientific base is the key to our future and the House should do more to promote the work of our scientists and engineers. I hope that the Secretary of State will pay close attention to the work of the parliamentary and scientific committee and the parliamentary information technology committee over the next few months. Those are unique vehicles, bringing together representatives of academia, industry and Parliament in an unusual way. Many countries envy the bodies that we have created in the House. I hope that the DTI will use those bodies to greater effect because they enable rational debates to take place about some of the difficult long-term problems that we all face.

We must concentrate on some of the issues around energy and climate change as well as productivity and the future of manufacturing. Those are complex and inter-dependent subjects that we cannot ignore. We cannot and should not try to compete with low-wage economies—we must not follow the path of some in this House who want to see the scrapping of minimum wage and health and safety legislation. We should use our influence as a nation to raise the standards of production throughout the world. I hope that my right hon. Friend, in his discussions with the TUC and employers' organisations, will encourage them to participate more actively in world forums to ensure that standards of employment and, particularly, of safety are raised throughout the world. We have high standards and we should be proud of them. We should not dilute them, but rather encourage others to meet them.

Productivity is not simply about making workers work faster and harder; it is about organisation and good management. Good terms and conditions go hand in glove with high productivity—they are not opposites. It is ludicrous for the Conservatives to describe themselves as the party of the family when they oppose giving parents the right to request flexible working, the extension of parental leave, the right to four weeks paid holiday, tax credits and Labour's record investment in child care. We are not entirely clear whether the Conservatives are committed to supporting the minimum wage.

Energy and climate change are areas that need real vision. My right hon. Friend referred to the need for greener and cleaner policies, but those policies must incorporate real vision. I want to see the DTI acting as a driver to bring together all the players necessary to help us move towards a hydrogen economy. It can and must be done, otherwise our Kyoto targets will slip and manufacturing opportunities will go abroad. Fuel companies and vehicle manufacturers need confidence in each other's commitment. That will be achieved only if the Government help to bring together the key players and to build the necessary teamwork. I remind anyone who thinks that that is pie in the sky that we have had a hydrogen-powered vehicle here in the precincts of the Palace of Westminster. It happened to be a Vauxhall Zafira. I am proud of that. The issues are how we drive down manufacturing costs and manage fuel distribution

economically. It can and will be done, but how quickly and how big our stake is in the technology will involve the Government—the leadership of Government is needed.

Early decisions are needed on how we generate power for electricity and create the fuels of tomorrow. My right hon. Friend should never allow the country to become dependent on a single source. That is the risk that we run with today's policies. Security of both supply and price are at risk if we become over-reliant on imported gas. We should start with the premise that there needs to be several sources—we need a genuine mixed and balanced policy. The pricing mechanism needs to be much more sophisticated to avoid moves such as are occurring today, for example buying in the cheapest fuel, which happens to be gas at the moment. If we carry on in that way it will mortgage our future and leave us with too little room for manoeuvre. I have come to the conclusion that because we need to protect a genuinely balanced policy and because of the loss of capacity from the closure of the early phase of nuclear power stations, part of the solution lies in new nuclear build. At the same time, much more needs to be done with wind and solar technologies. They are not mutually exclusive—we need to promote all those technologies.

I realise that this is not a five-minute solution. It is by no means easy to take that proposition through this House and all its processes, and to engage in rational debates about it with the public. However, the technology has improved massively and waste issues are hugely lower than in earlier generations of nuclear build. Moreover, it is now possible, with the right leadership from Government—I am not talking about the Chancellor with his cheque book—to put together a financial consortium that would back new nuclear build. That needs to be explored as part of a move towards a balanced policy.

In conclusion, the DTI has done remarkably well on a whole host of matters. In our manifesto we have committed ourselves to continuing to work towards the improvement of working conditions while keeping an eye on the need to increase productivity and be more competitive. Those are key roles. The leadership role that the Department provides in that respect is mission critical to the success of our country. It needs to be supported by a long-term vision about the way in which science and technology will help to address some of the problems facing us. That science and technology will also provide the basis for successful business and industry here in the future.

12.46 pm

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller) because he and I represent constituencies in the same county. I am not sure whether he is aware that for a time I was associated with a major employer in his constituency, known then as the Bridgewater Paper Co. As a past non-executive director of that company—fully declared in the Register of Members' Interests—I know that the company played its full part in the green agenda. It extracted water from the local river and returned it to the watercourse a lot cleaner. In addition, it had a magnificent, but very expensive, combined heat and power system to generate the electricity that it required. It was highly efficient and, again, very much part of the green economy.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Burnley (Kitty Ussher) has left her place because I intended to pay tribute to her maiden speech. She painted an attractive picture of Burnley and its immediate environment. Knowing the town and the area well, I agree that it is a lovely area in many ways. I also know it because historically I have taken a huge interest in the textile and clothing industry. That area of Lancashire has been involved over hundreds of years in the production of textiles and clothing.

I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Lady's immediate predecessor, Peter Pike, with whom I worked closely in this place over a number of years. He and I served on the Modernisation Committee and he left that Committee only when he left the House at the end of the last Parliament. We shall watch with interest to see whether the new Leader of the House will reappoint that Committee or take my advice and merge the Modernisation Committee with the Procedure Committee, which I had the privilege of chairing during the past two Parliaments. I am not looking to him to do that and appoint me—or, indeed, for the Committee to appoint me—as Chairman; I just believe that there is a great deal of common ground between the two Committees. They cross over in many areas and they trespass into each other's preserves, and I believe that it would be better to have a Back-Bench Member chairing that Committee. Having a Cabinet Minister as Chairman undermines the independence and integrity of a House Committee. It is the only Select Committee that is chaired by a Cabinet Minister.

Although she is no longer here, may I say to the hon. Member for Burnley that I was privileged to serve in the House with her predecessor's predecessor, Dan Jones, who was a truly magnificent man. He was a coal miner who never lost his roots, but took to this place and represented Burnley with huge distinction. He and I worked together on textiles, mainly. I remember going to British Home Stores to see some of the leading executives of that company to persuade them that because it was called British Home Stores they should stock and sell more goods that had some connection with Great Britain and the United Kingdom as a whole. He was a fearless campaigner, and Burnley in both Dan Jones and Peter Pike had two magnificent representatives.

In the House, we frequently hear one of the Chancellor's boasts about his management of the economy—that the economy has experienced 50 quarters of consecutive growth. I admit from the Opposition Benches that that is true, but the Chancellor does not tell us that 20 of those quarters—from the third quarter of 1992 to the second quarter of 1997—were under a Conservative Government and Prime Minister John Major, when the economy was performing extremely well. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Michael Jack), who is sitting close to me, was well aware as a Treasury Minister of the success of our Chancellor at that time and of the Conservative Government.

The Chancellor was fortunate to inherit an economy from the previous Government that was in such fantastic shape. According to his biographer, one Tom Bower, when the Chancellor entered the Treasury in 1997, Treasury officials told him that the economic figures for the United Kingdom were fantastically good and that the state of the economy was much better than

[Sir Nicholas Winterton]

predicted. I remind the House that this was the same economy, incidentally, that the Chancellor claimed was a complete Tory mess. He went on to say that the economy needed to be cleared up. The truth is that the Chancellor of the Exchequer inherited a tremendous golden legacy from the then Conservative Government.

I want to touch on matters relating to MG Rover. Labour's recently acquired reputation for sound economic management has withstood news—we know this, having come through a general election—which in another period of our history would have seriously damaged the governing party. Even before the MG Rover job losses are taken into account—in the 1960s and 1970s this would have been an unthinkable calamity—1 million manufacturing jobs have been lost under this Labour Government since 1997. While overall unemployment has fallen over much of the Government's term of office, it is now sadly—I say this with deep regret—rising again. It rose some 29,000 in March this year to reach 1.43 million. That figure—I say this to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), whom I congratulate on his new role—would be much higher still had it not been for the creation of 583,000 public sector jobs by the Government since 1997. Some 146,000 of those were created in the last year alone. I welcome the fact that people are in work, but although those jobs have kept people from the dole queue, they are what I describe as unproductive jobs. That is not to cast aspersions on the ability of those who hold those jobs. The Centre for Policy Studies calculates that, in the year to the first quarter of 2004, productivity in the economy as a whole grew by 1.2 per cent., yet in the public sector it shrank by 1.3 per cent. That draws attention to the true state of the economy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset held the important portfolio of shadow Chancellor leading up to and during the election campaign. I regret that more time was not devoted during that campaign to the economy, employment, pensions, taxation and the impact of the European Union on the economy. I believe that the non-jobs being created by the Government have been doubly damaging. They add to the taxation burden and at the same time create scarcity in more important sectors of the job market, making it harder for the wealth-creating sector to recruit. That is important. While I welcome many of the improvements that have been made in employment, the Government should give more attention to the impact that such measures have on the competitiveness of United Kingdom industry.

Much was said by the Secretary of State in his opening speech about the improvements provided for those in employment. It reminds me that tomorrow I am due to attend a celebration with a company in my constituency called Complete Medical Communications, which has been given a work-life balance award—something for which I know the Government will take credit. The company provides its employees with greater flexibility in balancing their lives and their work. Of course, many companies manage to do that, but many small companies would find it extremely difficult.

I wish to look briefly at the trade figures. In 2004, according to the impeccable Office for National Statistics, our country imported £58 billion-worth of goods: more than it exported. If we take account of invisibles—my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, in his history and pedigree, contributed to invisibles in his work in the City—such as banking and financial services, the figures are little better. We have a net deficit of £39 billion compared with a small surplus that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer inherited from the Conservative Administration in 1997.

To paraphrase an article that I read in *The Sunday Telegraph* at the beginning of the election campaign, in 1970 Harold Wilson's unexpected defeat was partially put down to one month's bad trading figures, which the Government blamed, believe it or not, on the purchase of two jumbo jets by British Airways—yet last year's far more dramatic trade deficit was hardly reported outside the business pages and technical business press.

I find that extraordinary, and I ask my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset why the matter was not discussed at much greater length during the general election campaign. The governing Labour party, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor are extremely vulnerable. As the months pass us by, we shall see much more evidence of what I am talking about now.

Bad trade figures, of course, are not so urgent in 2005 as they were in the 1970s, when memories of the 1967 devaluation were still fresh in the mind and there were worries about a run on the pound. They are indicative, however, of the general direction of Labour's economic policy. In 1997, Gordon Brown inherited a strong economy in which growth was export-led, but in the subsequent eight years he has turned our economy into one driven by Government borrowing and consumer debt, which is sucking in imports and burdening industry with taxes to pay the wages of those in the public sector—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman, who is experienced in the ways of the House, of the importance of referring to the office rather than naming the individual. I would not like any of our newer Members to think that it was acceptable to refer to Ministers in that way.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: May I say, Madam Deputy Speaker, how courteous you are and how appropriate it is for you to reprimand me for failing to use the right language, particularly when Mr. Speaker only recently issued a wonderful letter about the conventions and courtesies of the House?

I am saying that our country's economy is not in the state that many people would have us believe. With the country increasingly living beyond its means, the Government will have to face a day of reckoning in the near future.

Before I finish, I want to emphasise the important role of manufacturing industry. I said earlier that I would refer briefly to the problems of MG Rover, which broke out just as the country went into the general election campaign. I am deeply worried, as are Members on both sides of the House, that a group of four people who inherited and took over huge industrial capital assets

could end up so remarkably wealthy, when many thousands of people in the west midlands ended up without a job. There is something fundamentally wrong with our system when failure can result in the people who created it walking away with a huge package of money and assets, while those who have actually created the wealth and been part of an important manufacturing sector of the UK have lost their jobs.

I am pleased to hear that the economy is, as the Government state, doing so well and that businesses will seek to employ some of those who lost their jobs in the MG Rover plant at Longbridge. However, will the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs tell us in her reply what action the Government will take against those who were responsible for bringing about the collapse of that plant, particularly as they have walked away from this sad saga with millions of pounds? If we are to believe in capitalism, as I do, it must be an acceptable form of capitalism whereby profits are shared not only by those who take executive decisions, but by those who do the work on the shop floor to produce the goods that the country needs. I believe that the Government have a duty to do so and I hope that the Secretary of State will deal with the sad circumstances of MG Rover. I must say, as a long-serving Member, that I am surprised that those problems did not feature more strongly in the election campaign.

It is important to view the subject in a wider context. Many people work hard to generate wealth, but if a company fails, perhaps through bad management or bad executive decisions, those at the top often walk away with huge packages totalling more than the average working man and woman in this country earn in a lifetime, while those who hew the coal at the coal face walk away with very little. Increasingly, people are beginning to have doubts about the effectiveness of capitalism. As I said, I am a Conservative who believes in the generation of wealth, but I want it to be fairly distributed.

Before I finish, I want to raise another subject that is relevant to industry. So many people in private industry are finding that the purchasing power of their pension is being dramatically reduced. Part of the reason for that—I hope that the Government will be prepared to admit their responsibility—is the way in which the pension funds were depleted in 1997, and have continued to be so to the tune of more than £5 billion a year. In eight years, more than £40 billion has been removed from this country's pension funds—a situation exacerbated by the fall in the stock market. Tens of thousands of people throughout the country are now looking forward to a much less prosperous retirement than would otherwise have been the case. Will there be any meaningful move to try to help those people? Will the Government introduce measures to provide meaningful, real incentives for people to save for their retirement and to prevent companies from abusing their pension funds, often to assist their cash-flow problems?

As the Secretary of State knows, just over the border in Derbyshire, Ferodo faces a crisis over pension provision. I have constituents who work there and they raised the matter with me. I believe that the success of industry is essential to the success of pensions, but we should not allow people to be deprived of the pension for which they have saved for so many years of their working lives to ensure that they retire with a decent standard of life.

This debate is important. We can range widely, as I have, and we should never forget that manufacturing industry is the only sustainable source of non-inflationary economic growth. We should ensure that before any measure introduced in this place reaches the statute book, its impact on industry and the productive sector of our economy is properly understood.

1.8 pm

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley) (Lab): I am pleased to follow a fellow officer of the all-party clothing, textiles and footwear group and I hope that we shall have at least one new recruit in my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Kitty Ussher), who gave us a wonderful description of the mills in her area. I often contest claims that the north-west was the sole source of the industrial heartland, as Derbyshire has world heritage status for the Derwent valley with the amazing mills of Arkwright and the growth of the textiles sector.

Though reluctant to disagree with the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), I have to say that I do not recognise the golden picture that he painted of the years under the last Conservative Government. I seem to recall that over that period the textile industry had a very difficult time and that 500,000 jobs were lost in that sector alone. When the Tories were last in power, about 1,000 businesses went bust every week. I also remember that 3 million people were unemployed and interest rates stood at 15 per cent., so I do not look back to that period as the golden age that he portrayed.

I should like to touch on a few key themes relating to the Department of Trade and Industry: manufacturing industry, climate change, which crosses over with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and equalities. I welcome the general thrust of the Queen's Speech and its emphasis on continuing our wonderful investment in and improvement of public services, tackling child and pensioner poverty, addressing the international agenda on development and putting climate change and poverty in Africa at the top of our priorities for the G8 summit, our provision of greater support for working families, promoting opportunity and fairness. But at its heart is the question of economic stability and the need to entrench it while also promoting long-term growth and prosperity. That was where the Queen's Speech started. It is important that manufacturing is at the heart of what we do on the economy and I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to ensure that it is a priority for him.

I welcomed the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley, who made clear how important manufacturing is in her constituency. Like others have done, I note the excellence of her maiden speech and the good picture that she gave us of her constituency. We have some wonderful new additions to the Labour Benches and I know that some of them wish to contribute to the debate. Our new Members are all excellent, but I am especially pleased that the majority of them are wonderful new women Members to add to our ranks. It is appropriate that, when our new Deputy Minister for Women is here representing one of the Departments under discussion today, so many of our new women Members should seek to make their maiden speeches.

[Judy Mallaber]

My constituency has one of the highest proportions of jobs in manufacturing—some 30 per cent. People work outside the constituency at Toyota in South Derbyshire. We have all heard about the horrors that happened at Rover. I endorse the comments about the unfair contrast between what happened to those who managed the debacle and those who have suffered through losing their jobs. I hope that the successful taskforce set up after 9/11 for Rolls-Royce and its supply chain can be a model for trying to get new jobs for Rover workers. However, Toyota is a car company that is doing well and expanding. Indeed, anyone who wants to know about productivity should go and look at the Toyota production line and observe the steps that the staff take to cut an extra hundredth of a second off the production process and the teamwork at the plant that has led to some of its success.

My constituency is also home to people who work at Rolls-Royce and in its supply chain, It heartens me when I travel by plane to know that every single rotor blade on the engine is so carefully looked after when it comes back to my constituency. That happens on one of the small industrial estates that were set up after the closure of the pits—one reason why we have so much diverse manufacturing. We have large employers, such as Thorntons chocolates and Denby pottery, as well as a range of smaller companies that do everything from making jigsaws to providing the high-tech composite materials for Formula 1 cars and our Olympic gold medal winning bicycle. We also have the headquarters of the largest private construction company in the country, whose boss is the chair of our learning and skills council in Derbyshire.

The constituency has lost many textile jobs, but that industry is still an important part of our local economy. In the future, the textiles industry may expand in new technical areas. Indeed, when I visited the company that makes the composite materials for Formula 1 cars, I was surprised to learn that it is actually a textile-based technology. The racing drivers might feel a bit nervous if they knew that.

We have had job losses in textiles and other industries, but unemployment in Amber Valley has fallen by 1,000 under this Labour Government. Long-term unemployment has fallen by 82 per cent. and youth unemployment by 77 per cent. It is appalling that the Opposition parties proposed to do away with some of the programmes—including the new deal, which has been so important—that have helped us to achieve those figures. Opposition parties have also proposed cuts to the Small Business Service and getting rid of regional selective assistance, but that would not assist them to promote manufacturing and industry.

I welcome the steps that have been taken by our Government to promote manufacturing. Strong macro-economic stability is at the base of that, but the changes to taxation to support manufacturing investment—regional venture capital funds, capital allowances for small firms and the establishment of the manufacturing advisory service—have been a great help. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller) mentioned the amazing amount of investment that we are putting into our science base, which had been shamefully neglected, and that is critical for manufacturing. I would also single out the work the Government have done to promote modern apprenticeship programmes. However, from my experience on the Trade and Industry Committee, I can see some areas in which we could take more action to improve the focus of some of our initiatives. We have done a great deal, but we need a commitment that manufacturing will continue to be one of the major priorities for the Department.

As I have talked to people in my constituency and in my work on the Trade and Industry Committee, I have realised what we need to do to change our manufacturing sector into the highly skilled, high-value, knowledge-intensive one that will enable us to compete. We need to ensure that the initiatives we take and the support we provide are clearly focused to make the most of them. Industrialists still sometimes perceive that we have a plethora of business support initiatives at regional and sub-regional level. I know that efforts have been made to streamline that support, but we need to ensure that our initiatives are easily understood and that business people know about them, because that is not always the case. Confusion still exists about the roles of different bodies. The structure might seem clear to us when we set it up, but it is not necessarily always clear to those seeking to access support whether they should go to Business Link, the manufacturing advisory service, the regional development agency or another body. It is not always clear what the learning and skills councils do and what the sector skills councils do. All those are important initiatives, but we need to do everything we can to ensure that industrialists know what help is available.

Public procurement is also a source of continuing concern for business. It is strongly believed that other EU countries somehow find a way to favour their own interests. That point was made in my area in relation to Bombardier and certain textile contracts. I hope that we will see what we can do to assist our own industries, without breaking the rules.

We must ensure that our wonderful training and skills agenda continues to keep education and skills at the heart of what we are doing. We must do that to ensure that manufacturers can take the high-quality competitive path. The skills and training that we provide must be genuinely linked to the industrial needs of our manufacturing businesses. For example, in our textiles industry we have wonderful young designers, but they have problems bringing their ideas to market. But we need the structures to provide people with skills in technical textiles manufacturing, which has amazing potential, including bandages that mend wounds, protective clothing and items used in the construction industry. Technical textiles have so many potential uses, but we must provide the courses to enable people to improve their skills in that area, rather than just the fashion end of the market.

During the election campaign, I made some wonderful visits relating to education and training. Pupils at a secondary school in my constituency, Aldercar, take both vocational and academic qualifications. The school is at the forefront of our programme for ensuring that proper vocational education is available in schools. It has talked to local business people and others who want to take on students with such vocational qualifications and is conscious that

the students must also have basic academic skills. Staff ensure that students have the necessary academic skills and that students who are going on to an academic career have an understanding of other forms of qualification. I was heartened to see their work.

I also visited a distribution centre that has set up its own learning centre on site, run jointly by USDAW and management, to enable people working there to enhance their skills and engage in lifelong learning. In the last Parliament, when we discussed support for union learning representatives in Committee, I was shocked at the Conservative opposition to a measure that would enable initiatives such as the one in my constituency to be set up. Through the union learning fund, union learning reps encourage other members of the work force to enhance their skills. That has to be the way forward for our economy. That a major political party could oppose something that is so helpful and important in promoting skills and training is beyond me.

I have touched on a few items for the promotion of our manufacturing and skills agenda that I hope Ministers will keep firmly in their sights and I want to talk briefly about two more items. The first is energy.

I was interested by the sudden spewing out of articles on nuclear energy since the election. It is clear that we must have a debate about where we are going and that obviously involves both Departments represented in the Chamber today. We need to consider how to maintain sustainable energy sources. We must deal with the climate change problem and ensure that we have secure and affordable energy supplies. That will clearly be a major debate in the months to come.

From what I read and see, I am unclear about the real figures on energy—as, I suspect, are many others. We need to do sufficient work on energy efficiency, clean coal technology and promoting renewables, all of which need extra impetus. I shall not go through the arguments again but we need to do much more. Indeed, I am looking forward to meeting a retired farmer in my constituency who is completely into biofuels and will show us the wonderful plants that we should be using to develop energy sources. I am looking forward to my house being fuelled by such energy. There is great enthusiasm about those ideas, but I am still unclear about whether, even if we concentrate on all those things, there will still be an energy gap.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry showed deft skill in picking up the difficult proposals on tuition fees and steering them and their amendments towards proposals that were more acceptable to some of us on the Labour Benches. I hope that he will use all those skills in the energy debate. I hope that the argument that somehow there is a huge energy gap that cannot be covered without a new generation of nuclear power stations is not put in aspic so that, by default, that is felt to be inevitable, although I feel that some people may be trying to portray the situation in that way. We need a major debate on the economics of nuclear power and about who pays the price.

We must also consider the disposal of nuclear waste, something about which I am conscious as we have experienced difficulties with the disposal of low-level radioactive waste from Rolls-Royce at Hilts quarry in Crich in my constituency. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is well aware of that situation because the material comes from Rolls-Royce in Derby. It is traumatic and people are hugely upset and concerned even though only low-level waste is involved. That has been an issue in my constituency for several years and the waste is now going to Drigg. I am well aware of all the difficulties in disposing of radioactive waste, but I hope that we do not rush into things pell-mell and that guidelines being set out at present will not automatically take us towards that form of energy generation.

My final remarks are about the equalities agenda. I am delighted at the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Ms Munn) as Deputy Minister for Women and Equality. I hope that the Secretary of State in whose Department she resides will give her complete support in dealing with the difficult job of putting pressure on every Department to take on board equalities and gender equality issues. That is the most difficult part of her job and she will need complete support from Cabinet Ministers to press that agenda. I realise that her job may be even more difficult because she reports to one Secretary of State on gender and another on the overall equalities agenda. That is ironic given that the equalities Bill, which I very much welcome, will bring together equality and human rights, and, at last, put a positive duty on public authorities to promote gender equality. A recent report from the DTI on the income gap between men and women shows how such matters range across Departments—pensions, tax credits, pay and so on; none can be dealt with in isolation. On behalf of my hon. Friend, who will, I know do an excellent job, I appeal to her senior Ministers to back her in putting pressure on other Departments and agencies to promote the equalities agenda.

I particularly welcome the work and families Bill on working life and child care. When the Trade and Industry Committee produced its report on employment regulation we quizzed witnesses about flexible working and the application of current provisions. We received a favourable response and I am pleased that that provision will be extended.

Our child care agenda is critical. That is an economic as well as a social issue and it is important that we promote it.

I very much welcome those items in the Queen's Speech and our future programme, and hope that Ministers will do everything they can to help us carry out the difficult agenda before us. I welcome the Queen's Speech and commend it to the House.

1.27 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber), who gave us a clear exposition of some of the manufacturing and other issues connected with her constituency.

"In rising to speak in this House for the first time, I ask for the indulgence which is normally accorded to maiden speakers and my feeling of trepidation in speaking here on the first occasion is somewhat allayed by the experience of very great kindness which I have received from Members of all parties and indeed from everyone . . . in this House."—[*Official Report*, 19 April 1950; Vol. 474, c. 167.]

Those are my sentiments, but the words were spoken by my most illustrious predecessor more than 50 years ago. It is a tribute to a Member of Parliament that after

[Stephen Hammond]

50 years he is so fondly remembered in his constituency. Mr., later Sir, Cyril Black is still remembered in Wimbledon as one of our most favoured sons. He was devoted to the community and was the epitome of what a good constituency MP should be.

Even during the recent election campaign, several older constituents reminded me of Sir Cyril's good works and efforts on their behalf, and entreated me, were I fortunate enough to be elected to this place, to ensure that I was a Member of Parliament like him. He was a tireless campaigner for, and a promoter of, Wimbledon. He was truly Wimbledon's voice in this place, and in both those endeavours I intend to try to emulate him. It is a testament to his work that his name lives on in buildings and roads throughout Wimbledon. Various large office blocks are named after him. One of his memorials from grateful constituents is the Sir Cyril Black way, which I trod during the recent campaign—*[Interruption.]* No, it was certainly not the third way.

Hon. Members will understand that I hope that I can do as much for my constituents now as Sir Cyril did for them 50 years ago, and I rather hope that my memorial will not be the Stephen Hammond cul-de-sac. However, his maiden speech was notable for one thing: he did not address any of his opening remarks to his predecessors or, indeed, the constituency. That is a trend that I do not intend to follow.

After Sir Cyril Black, Sir Michael Havers served in this House with great distinction as Attorney-General during the Falklands campaign and was a distinguished Member of the other place. Dr. Charles Goodison-Wickes is principally remembered in Wimbledon for the fact that he was the Member of Parliament who went to the Gulf war. Most recently, Roger Casale, although he and I disagreed on most things political, was, I believe, well intentioned and sought to do his best for the people of Wimbledon.

To some, Wimbledon is strawberries and Pimms, tennis and hot summer days; to others, it is the Wombles. To those of us who live there, it is not just the leafy suburb of SW19 that one sees on the television for two weeks a year; it is the best place to live. It is a very diverse area, each part of it unique and each part of it special. We have the part that most people see—the unique city village, which is Wimbledon village. We have a vibrant town centre where business, visitors and residents alike work together. Wimbledon common is protected not by the Wombles but by the excellent work of the Conservatives, and the common land Bill that we may see through during this Parliament will be welcome.

We have a very lively small business community and a cultural life enriched by the phoenix of the New Wimbledon theatre rising from the ashes two years ago, supported by a very active civic trust that works with schools to promote the arts. We have another common in Wimbledon that most people do not know about—Cannon Hill common, which joins two of our residential areas, West Barnes and Cannon Hill. I myself am fortunate to live in the splendidly named Wimbledon Park ward, which has the magnificent Inigo Jones-designed park.

I believe that Wimbledon is simply the best place to live, but it is not without its concerns and problems. Local transport has suffered as a result of the inconsistent policies of the Mayor and of the Government: the illogical decision to stop the East London line at Clapham Junction, the delayed Thameslink, and the poor service that we receive on the District line, which is the subject of a campaign by me and my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Justine Greening) and for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands) that we will further pursue through this Parliament.

Unlike the hon. Member for Burnley (Kitty Ussher), I am not sure that I recognise, after eight years, all the positives on education. Several of our primary and secondary schools have had to face deficit budgets this year. Standards do not match those of surrounding boroughs. There is a real need for a diversity of provision and for an increase in vocational training, and a particular need for a school-based sixth form.

Conservation is one of the key issues. We need to protect our metropolitan open land from the onslaught of overdevelopment. The high quality of life in Wimbledon stems from the fact that we have protected our green spaces, parks and playing fields. We must continue to do that, and I pledge to do all that I can in this House to ensure that that happens.

Today has been set aside for us to talk about environment and industry, so I want to touch on two issues—one is mentioned in the Queen's Speech and one is not—that are relevant to the constituency and to the topics of the day. Like many other constituencies across the country, Wimbledon has experienced a huge increase in the number of applicants for phone masts over the past few years. I recognise the need to balance the ever-increasing demands of users against local residents' concerns, rational health concerns against the "phone fried my brain" health scares, and over-expansion against nimbyism. However, the simple fact is that the siting of phone masts near homes, schools and hospitals, the health effects, and particularly concentrations of masts should be matters for proper consideration. The old telephone exchange on the Ridgway in my constituency already has 10 different masts and equipment boxes on its roof. There are three outstanding applications, each of which is for six more multiple masts. There is a high incidence of cancer in local areas.

Local residents and I have campaigned to oppose that concentration and the visual intrusion, but to no avail. Local residents feel powerless and the local authority hides behind Government legislation that does not allow it to adjudicate many applications, so it waves through planning applications on the basis of prior approval without allowing the discussion of opposition on the grounds of health. We need to have a debate on the health concerns, including the impact of proximity and concentration and the most recent studies of Professor Henshall. We need to ensure that all phone mast developments are subject to full planning permission. Councils should be allowed to take on board health concerns and visual amenity. I trust that this House will have time to debate that at some stage during this Parliament.

I note that Her Majesty's speech said that legislation will be introduced to streamline regulatory structures and to remove outdated and unnecessary legislation. Let us hope that we have a bonfire of the targets. However, the Queen's Speech, which is heaving with

new Bills, does not do well in that regard. There can be few Members who, when campaigning, did not meet small business people who told us about the problems that they were facing with over-regulation. In Wimbledon, I was particularly struck by the number of such people in the construction industry. One gentleman, an electrician, showed me all the forms and ID that needed to be supplied for him to get on to a site, and told me that he is unable to compete with electricians from some of the newly acceded EU countries. He was but one of many. While one could say that that is only anecdotal evidence, one should not forget that the director-general of the British Chambers of Commerce recently said that it is fed up with the spiralling costs of regulation and estimates that overall regulation has cost £40 billion since 1997. If the Government are truly about to set about reducing the cost of regulation, we will support them. However, if we see a set of targets to reduce targets and regulation, and more administrators and regulators to reduce regulation, I am sure that there will be ironic smiles and laughter from Conservative Members and we will know that yet again the legislation will not work. For any legislation to be effective it must transform regulatory impact assessments, repeal some of the specific business regulation and grant some exemptions to small businesses.

I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech today and to the House for listening to me with courtesy and forbearance. I intend to be a loyal and conscientious Member of the House and to live up to my election pledge to be my constituency's voice in this place and to serve my constituents loyally.

1.37 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech during this debate on the Queen's Speech on industry and the environment, which are themes of immense importance to us all. Before I begin, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) on an excellent maiden speech. I have learned many things about Wimbledon that I did not know 10 minutes ago. He may be giving away his age by mentioning the Wombles, but I must confess that I remember them too.

It is a great honour to have been elected to represent the constituency of Llanelli, which I have to say is a marked contrast with Wimbledon. I follow three distinguished parliamentarians who have held this seat for Labour uninterruptedly since 1922. They are the hon. Dr. J. H. Williams, who served the constituency for 14 years, the right hon. Jim Griffiths, who served for 34 years, and the right hon. Denzil Davies, who served for 35 years. I do not intend to be in the running to try to break the record of 35 years, unless of course some future Chancellor who is much less competent than our current one leaves us with no option but to work on until an age that I do not intend to reveal today. I simply pledge to do my very best for my constituents during the time that I serve them.

My predecessors would have been delighted to hear the Prime Minister reaffirm last week to the parliamentary Labour party the importance of the Warwick agreement to this third term of Labour Government—an historic partnership between union members and Government to improve job security and working conditions. My immediate predecessor, the right hon. Denzil Davies, the Member for Llanelli for the past 35 years, will be remembered fondly by many in the House today and in the constituency for his immense ability, wit and eloquence. He served as a Minister in the Treasury under both the Wilson and the Callaghan Governments, and as an Opposition spokesman on Treasury matters, foreign affairs and defence.

How fitting it is that in the first Session in this historic third term of a Labour Government, we should be continuing to implement and update the vision of that great parliamentarian, Jim Griffiths, the second Labour Member for Llanelli. He is perhaps best known for his work as Minister of National Insurance, with the introduction of the national insurance Bill in 1948, which he described as

"a unified and comprehensive scheme covering the whole nation".

In this Session of Parliament we are once again committed to developing a workable model of pension provision that reflects the current demographic situation. Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that Jim Griffiths introduced the first system of family allowances. We shall continue to show our commitment to helping hardworking families through the extension of maternity leave and increased child care provision.

Dr. J. H. Williams, the first Labour MP for Llanelli, was well known for his work on miners' compensation. Indeed, he was one of only three Labour MPs elected in south Wales who was not a miner himself. Following on, Jim Griffiths in the autumn of 1945 was the driving force behind the National Insurance (Industrial Injuries) Act 1946, with its provisions based on his experience as compensation secretary for the south Wales miners.

It is with great pride, therefore, that in this debate on industry I continue the work of my predecessors by supporting the corporate manslaughter Bill, which will create a new offence enabling the conviction of corporations for homicide where death has been caused by a management failure to ensure the health and safety of its employees. That is not because anything can ever adequately compensate for the grief at the loss of a loved one, but because it highlights the need for continued vigilance and should lead to a more responsible approach by all employers to the safety of their workers to prevent accidents.

As one glances across the Llanelli constituency, one sees looming large on the skyline the chapels and working men's clubs that fostered the democratic radicalism which to this day has given us a strong sense of community, a determination to care for the vulnerable and a certainty in our belief that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve much more than we achieve alone.

It was this warm and caring community, materially poor but spiritually rich, that welcomed into its midst an eastern European refugee family by the name of Hecht. They changed their name to Howard—a very thoughtful gesture, but hardly necessary in Llanelli, where "Hecht" presents few problems to those of us who regularly say "Llanelli". It was their shop to which the coalminers and tinplate workers and their families went to spend their hard-earned pennies to buy their Sunday best. Mr. and Mrs. Howard's son, who is better known

[Nia Griffith]

to the House as the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, went on to serve in the Thatcher Government—a Government who were to deal such a bitter blow to the coal and steel industries, throwing thousands out of work and ripping the heart out of those warm and caring communities.

Since the election of a Labour Government in 1997, hope has returned and there has been regeneration on an unprecedented scale. We have seen the benefits of a well-managed economy reaching Llanelli, with unemployment levels falling dramatically. Diversification and regeneration have increased the proportion of jobs linked to tourism and other service industries, but in spite of all the challenges of the global economy, manufacturing continues to account directly for some 20 per cent. of the employment in the constituency, with many more jobs being linked indirectly. That is rather higher than the national average of 14 per cent., though it cannot quite compete with the figure of 30 per cent. reported by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber).

Although we are now supplying parts to a range of car companies, jobs have been affected by the Rover tragedy, and it is vital that we secure alternative employment and do not let the skills be wasted. I welcome our measures to facilitate capital for small businesses and the role of the manufacturing advisory service.

At one time, with the old images of the industrial revolution, it might have seemed contradictory to link industry and caring for our environment, but as was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry at the outset of the debate, both are vital aspects of our modern society, as we all want to benefit from the manufactured goods and a clean environment. There is an irony that it is our successful economic policies supporting thriving industries and improved standards of living which threaten to make it more difficult for us to reduce our carbon emissions.

We must, however, continue to strive for cleaner, safer industrial practices and invest in the development of innovative technology that can provide the means to reduce carbon emissions. We need to look with increased urgency at the development of all forms of renewable energy, and at new technologies that help us to reduce energy consumption. Surrounded on three sides by tidal waters, the Llanelli constituency could be an ideal site for a tidal power station, perhaps spanning the Loughor estuary, in the same way as the Rance barrier in northern France has been producing electricity for some 40 years.

As one glances across the skyline of the constituency, one sees a land of contrasts—tradition and the modern, the juxtaposition of our industrial heritage, our spectacular scenery and our regeneration projects; the rolling countryside; rows of terraced houses perched perilously on the hillsides sloping down past the historic castle of Kidwelly to the sea and the new marina at Burry Port; the magnificent coastline now enhanced by the millennium coastal park created from the biggest industrial reclamation project in Europe; the coastal link road snaking its way past the brand-new world-class golf course and the skeletal asbestos-ridden factories soon to be demolished to make way for a leisure village; the shimmering glass pyramid of the modern shopping centre and the boarded-up shops, like the last remaining ghost of yesteryear, shortly to be done up; the colossal Corus steelworks; the new Technium centre for innovation; an ex-miner struggling to get his breath, his lungs permanently damaged by coal dust; and boys playing rugby, a reminder of Llanelli's scrum-half Dwayne Peel, who played in all five of Wales's grand slam victory matches this year.

One senses apprehension about the challenges facing our manufacturing industry, hope arising from the regeneration, a vitality, a spirit of community, an anticipation, an expectation and, above all, a conviction that it is a Labour Member who can best serve Llanelli. I am proud to be that Member. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak, and I thank the House for listening to me so attentively.

1.47 pm

Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) on her maiden speech. Wales is the heart of oratory. We have heard some great Welsh orators in Parliament, and she spoke with clarity, humanity and humour about herself and her constituency. The one thing that she did not mention was the wonderful singing that comes from Wales. I remind the hon. Lady of the opportunities of the parliamentary choir, and I am sure that, should her voice be appropriately mellifluous, my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Bill Wiggin) would be only too happy to invite her to join. The more good voices, the better the choir performs.

I wish the hon. Lady well in her parliamentary career. I hope that she follows one or two other traits of her august predecessor, the right hon. Denzil Davies, with whom I used to participate in economic debates. One never quite knew what Denzil was going to say. He had his own unique and very independent perspective and as time wore on, that independence shone forth. He was a keen analyst of the economic situation and what he had to say was always worth listening to.

I begin my contribution to this debate by drawing the House's attention to the business interests that I declare in the Register of Members' Interests. I shall deal with matters connected with the environment and climate change, especially in the context of the work of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, of which I had the honour of being Chairman in the previous Parliament. Subsequently, I shall deal with issues connected with my constituency's manufacturing interests and the future of the UK aerospace industry.

When the Queen's Speech was finally printed, I thought that an error had been made. I was looking for a sentence to the effect that the Government would continue to recognise the importance of worldwide action to combat the threat of global warming, and so on. However, no such sentence appeared, not even one of a declaratory nature. That is disappointing, especially given the priority assigned by the Prime Minister to the impact of climate change, Britain's current G8 presidency and our forthcoming presidency of the EU. I salute the fact that the Prime Minister has given climate change a top priority, but it is disappointing that the Queen's Speech did not mention it, and that there are

no specific proposals to deal with some of the challenging issues exposed by the most recent Select Committee report.

My first concern has to do with the G8. The sentence that I found to be missing from the Queen's Speech would, I hope, have gone on to say that the Government hoped to influence the US, India, China and others to take up their Kyoto treaty responsibilities. If that was not acceptable, I would have hoped that some other means of bringing those countries into line could have been found, but only yesterday I heard an American city mayor say on Radio 4 that he and other mayors would like to get together and do something about climate change on a city-by-city basis. American science appears to be in denial about the problem of climate change, but it is clear that American mayors would like to introduce some form of emissions trading arrangement in the US. It seems that they feel guilty that their country is not prepared to take its international responsibilities seriously, and that they want to do something about one of the greatest threats facing mankind.

America may have the technological solutions to the problem, but there is no national impetus for that country—the planet's largest polluter—to take action. The existence of climate change is still a subject for debate in America, even though our chief scientist, Sir David King, told the Select Committee that carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions are at record levels. We know the facts of the matter, so measures to reduce greenhouse gas production make sense, both in terms of the precautionary principle and of simple politics in respect of the world and of energy. I cannot understand why the US refuses to put technological emphasis on reducing its dependence on hydrocarbon fuels, as that would relieve its dependence for fuel on some of the most politically unstable countries of the world—a dependence that stems from the current slowdown in the world economy.

It was disappointing that the Prime Minister did not use his G8 presidency to address those issues. It remains to be seen whether he will be brave enough to use his EU presidency to include aviation in the emissions trading regime, or adopt some other approach that might deal with a problem that is getting worse all the time.

The Select Committee looked at the problem, and it was clear that there are many Government fingers in the climate change agenda pie. The Treasury, the DTI and DEFRA are all involved, as are many other parts of Government, but the response does not appear to be joined up. For example, whatever the overall performance in reducing carbon dioxide emissions since 1997, the amount of those emissions arising from the transport sector has been rising. It is a source of great sadness that the UK has no coherent policy to deal with the problem.

I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), to his Front-Bench post. For some time, his Department has been advocating the establishment of a UK biofuels industry, and it has produced a nice coloured brochure entitled "The Facts on Biodiesel and Bioethanol". I read it assiduously. It talked about the job opportunities that would arise and the benefits that would accrue to UK agriculture, and gives the impression that the Government are entirely sold on the idea. However, in successive Budgets, the best that the Treasury has been able to provide is a duty derogation of 20p per litre. As a result, we are struggling to establish a viable biofuels industry.

The UK is a signatory to the European directive that requires us to achieve a biofuels inclusion rate of 2.75 per cent. by 2005, rising to more than 5 per cent. by 2010. If we cannot achieve that, we are required to say why. DEFRA subscribes to our having an indigenous biofuels industry, but we have no industry producing bioethanol—the green element included in petrol—and the Queen's Speech contained nothing to suggest that the Government intended to accelerate the process. All we have is a British Sugar planning application for a plant that would produce 55,000 tonnes of bioethanol a year.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, unless urgent progress is made, the risk is that we will simply suck in imports from Brazil and other countries instead of creating our own domestic industry, even though that industry would help our agriculture by providing a new stream of income?

Michael Jack: I was about to come to that. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the EU-Mercosur regional trade agreement gives Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay a bioethanol tariff quota of 1 billion litres, at generous rates. Perhaps that gives us the answer to the question of why the Government are not supporting a UK bioethanol industry enthusiastically. They have surrendered the supply of that commodity to Brazilian interests.

I woke up this morning to the news that an area the size of Belgium in the Brazilian rain forest has been destroyed in the past 12 months, which brings me back to the UK's G8 presidency and our environmental credentials. If we are serious about saving the world's environment and biodiversity, and about encouraging sustainability, we should address the problem of Brazilian rainforest degradation—a matter that has been raised in every one of the 18 years for which I have been a Member of this House. However, the international community appears powerless to stop the loss of the fantastic biodiversity resource that the world's rainforests represent. The latest finding from Brazil is just another example of that. If the G8 is to show its environment credentials, it must address that problem.

To achieve a 2.75 per cent. inclusion rate in bioethanol, our bioethanol production target is 660,000 tonnes, and a rate of 5 per cent. would require us to produce 1.2 million tonnes. The East of England Development Agency has conjectured that a UK bioethanol industry could create 12,000 new jobs. That is a prize worth having, and DEFRA itself has estimated that 5,000 new jobs would arise in connection with biofuels.

The Minister of State in the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs very kindly supplied me with a parliamentary answer indicating this country's capacity for biodiesel production, and in that context it is interesting to examine the plants currently available. Some 45,000 tonnes of indigenous biofuels

[Michael Jack]

using animal fat as a raw material ingredient are manufactured. In order to meet our 2.75 per cent. inclusion rate, we need to produce 440,000 tonnes of UK-produced biodiesel; to meet the 5 per cent. inclusion rate, we need to produce 880,000 tonnes. On adding up all the projected production of biodiesel in this country—be it from UK-grown oilseed rape, or from the recycling of cooking oils or other fats—our potential production is 478,000 tonnes, which is about half the amount that we need to produce to meet our 5 per cent. inclusion target.

I say in all sincerity to the Under-Secretary that if this Government are serious about the CO_2 reduction capabilities of a biofuels industry, his Department has got to be a much more effective champion of it within government, to ensure that it actually starts. It is no use falling back on the lame-duck excuse that if we are too generous with our duty derogation, that will somehow suck in imports. As I have said, the EU-Mercosur agreement makes it absolutely clear from where the European Union currently thinks that its biofuels will come, in the absence of an indigenous industry.

Given the fundamental changes to UK agriculture with the advent of the single farm payment, and given that land will now be available that can produce these fuels without in any way compromising the new agricultural regime, the time is now right for the United Kingdom to have its own biofuels industry, in order to help contribute to a reduction in CO_2 emissions, particularly in the transport sector.

When I interrupted the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry at the beginning of the debate, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs looked shocked at my having the temerity to suggest that she herself had indicated that the Government were unlikely to meet their own target of a 20 per cent. reduction in CO_2 emissions. I checked to see what evidence had been given to the Select Committee, and according to paragraph 25 of our report, DEFRA's Minister of State said that

"the reason the UK is lagging behind on its targets is due, in main, to a decrease in nuclear power generation combined with a greater than predicted increase in electricity demand and an increasing use of coal."

So there we have it—an admission from the Minister of State himself as to the reasons why the 2020 target has had to be revised downwards. We cannot dodge this issue.

Reference has been made in this debate to renewables and wind farms. I support renewable energy, but the fact is that given the many inquiries and delays that have taken place, we are going to slip behind. Such production stands at about 5 per cent., but the target is to reach 20 per cent. by 2020. Given the decline in nuclear capacity from some 20 per cent. to 7 per cent. on a similar time scale, all that we are doing is using every 1 per cent. of renewables to replace 1 per cent. of CO_2—free nuclear power generation. However, such power generation is already being eliminated through the phasing out of the Magnox stations and the advanced gas-cooled reactors.

I say with all the passion of a Member who represents the constituency in which the majority of Britain's nuclear fuel is manufactured that if we are to retain our ability in this area, and if we are to create a diverse portfolio of energy sources that gives this country the security that it has always benefited from, the Government have got to make clear their attitude to nuclear power. They must recognise that we already have a portfolio of energy sources that cost different amounts, recognise that the renewables option is expensive and survives only by virtue of the renewables obligation certificates through which renewables get the "necessary" subsidy, and recognise that we do need a new generation of nuclear power stations. Finally, Corwm should pull its finger out and get on with identifying the long-term deep depository that we need to deal with not just nuclear waste generated by the nuclear electricity industry, but with the stockpile of material in Sellafield. Once that issue is attended to—it has been done in Finland and in other countries—we can have an affordable future for nuclear power. I remind those colleagues who have criticised the economics involved that the advanced gas-cooled reactor industry already has to make its own provision for the decommissioning of fuel and, eventually, of those stations.

The Department of Trade and Industry got the all-party group on aerospace to look at the industry's innovation and technology requirements. My constituency is home to BAE Systems, to the Eurofighter Typhoon and to the Nimrod MRA4. We manufactured the Tornado, and we are working on the future offensive air system. Members may wonder why on earth I am getting hot under the collar about the future of our military aerospace industry, but the answer is very simple. When we come to the end of the current Eurofighter production run—be it tranche 2 or tranche 3—and we start manufacturing the American-designed joint strike fighter, to which the Americans hold all the technology keys, we will have nothing left. There is no new United Kingdom-based or European-based advanced-technology aerospace programme. We are moving towards becoming a jobbing shop that buys technology from other people.

The situation crystallised for me when last week, I got a copy of a magazine entitled *Aerospace International*. I turned with enthusiasm to the third page, which said "BAE Systems' unmanned air vehicle. New prototype flight." I thought, "At last, it has broken through into the next generation of military aircraft." But on investigating further, I found that the development was not at Warton, in my constituency, but somewhere in north America. It was BAE Systems North America that had produced this vehicle, as part of an American contract. Could the people in north America talk to the United Kingdom about it? No, because of the technology transfer barriers. So one of Britain's biggest manufacturing companies faces the dilemma of deciding where to invest in future. We are seeing major investment in north America and continuing investment in the United Kingdom, but against the background of an uncertain future.

In previous debates on this subject, I have posed many questions to Ministers about the future of our aerospace industry, be it projects or the development of materials or new technologies. We are good at aerospace—we are among the world leaders—and if we

want to keep those high-value-added jobs, this Government must invest in making certain that we have the right technologies for the future and the right projects. On the joint strike fighter, the Prime Minister should call in a favour from President Bush and make certain that we have access to such technologies, so that a final assembly and check-out plant and a maintenance plant for the JSF can be built. Most importantly, we need to be able to change the JSF in future to meet evolving technologies and capability requirements; we need to add our value and technology, to make certain that we keep up with the best in the world.

I want my constituency to maintain its nuclear manufacturing and aerospace capability, and I want my farmers to contribute to reducing greenhouse gases. I want this Government to put a tick by all those issues, to show that they are among key priorities that perhaps were not touched on in the Queen's Speech.

2.9 pm

Anne Snelgrove (South Swindon) (Lab): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech today, and I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Kitty Ussher) and for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), and the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), on making theirs.

It is an honour to represent the people of South Swindon and to follow in the footsteps of Julia Drown, who was the first woman to represent the seat. Julia will be a hard act to follow. She was much loved in Swindon and there was genuine sadness when she announced her retirement from this House. Julia's legacy can be seen throughout the constituency, most markedly in improvements to the national health service. In her maiden speech, she called for a new hospital to replace the crumbling Princess Margaret hospital. Both she and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) worked tirelessly to achieve that, and the Great Western was opened in 2002.

In her maiden speech, Julia cited the urology waiting list in 1997. It was already 18 months long and only emergency cases were being treated. Today, under Labour, 98 per cent. of urology patients in Swindon wait six months or less for treatment and the Great Western hospital is on target to make that 100 per cent. by Christmas.

In addition to her interest in the NHS, Julia was a passionate advocate of international development. She was the co-chair of the all-party group on heavily indebted poor countries and a leader in bringing international development issues to the fore. In particular, she helped to secure a timetable for spending 0.7 per cent. of national income on international aid. I can assure my constituents that I will push for a continued spotlight on international development issues and am pleased that the Government have already signalled that in the Queen's Speech. Julia set high standards, and I will do my best to follow her.

Swindon has its roots in the railways and there remains a strong manufacturing base in the town. It is home to small enterprises and corporations such as MAN ERF, Honda and Nationwide. Those businesses make a major contribution to our local and national economy. There is now virtually no unemployment, although like many similar towns we have a residual problem of people on long-term incapacity benefit. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has pledged to help those trapped on that benefit, but our major challenge in Swindon lies in improving the skills base of our work force so that we remain an attractive place for international companies to locate and a dynamic place for small business to flourish.

I grew up in a new town, similar to Swindon, and lived in a council house until I was 25. I was the first girl in my family to go on to higher education. Education provided me with expanded horizons and my parents gave me the determination to prove that I was just as good as those born in better circumstances. That determination has seen me elected to this House despite many setbacks. Education is my passion, and while I congratulate Swindon's local education authority on its recent good inspection, I am dismayed that it is thinking of closing local schools such as Salt Way, Windmill Hill, Freshbrook and Toothill. They are all good neighbourhood schools.

Swindon has an historically low education funding base and I want to look into that. I urge the Government to look at the pockets of deprivation that exist among areas of wealth. Averaging out tends to disguise deprivation, which is then much more difficult to tackle without adequate resources. Our investment is making a real difference to the life chances of Swindon's children. However, staying-on rates at 16 and 18 are below the national average, and if Swindon is to remain and grow as an attractive place for successful companies, it is vital that that is rectified.

That brings me to one the most exciting yet problematic issues facing Swindon. We have the opportunity to expand the university of Bath in Swindon to include faculties of medicine, arts and manufacturing. That would undoubtedly provide schools, colleges and industry with a focus to improve the skills base in the town as well as develop an international learning base for industry. I would go so far as to say that it is vital to the continued success of Swindon that the university comes to us. The problem lies with its chosen site, which is on greenfield land next to Coate water, our much-loved, beautiful country park. Some 17,000 people have signed a petition to stop Coate being developed as the university plans include four faculties, a campus, 2,000 houses and a business park. I now truly understand the meaning of the phrase "between a rock and a hard place". I am seeking a third way and will do my best to work with all the parties involved to try to reach a viable solution.

South Swindon is a constituency of great contrasts. It contains areas of outstanding natural beauty, such as the villages of Wroughton and Chiselden and a section of the Ridgeway. We have a second world war airfield at Wroughton, which now houses the science museum's national collection. I look forward to supporting its ambitious plans to create a science park on the site.

My constituency also includes the original railway village built during the great railway expansion of the early 19th century. That contrasts with the housing estates built in the next expansion of Swindon in the mid to late 20th century, many of them providing affordable rented housing for London overspill families.

[Anne Snelgrove]

Affordable housing is now scarce and there are 6,000 families on the council's housing waiting list. That is something that I would like to see addressed.

I am concerned that Swindonians who seek help with debt owe an average of £35,000, before mortgage debt. Many are young women with children who have been abandoned by their partners and are left to sort out the debt on their own. That cannot continue, and we are right to emphasise the responsibilities of credit companies as well as those of the individual.

Crime and antisocial behaviour are issues that local police, neighbourhood watch groups and other constituents will not tolerate, and I firmly share that view. The new police community support officers in Swindon will help, and, thanks to the Government, Swindon now has an antisocial behaviour hotline. Fifteen ASBOs have been issued in the past five years and we have seen a 5 per cent. drop in overall crime. However, it remains a concern for my constituents, and I pledge to work hard to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour in Swindon.

The street scene and built environment are hugely important. Swindon's town centre is a poor example of 1960's architecture. Regeneration is urgently needed, and we look to the New Swindon Company to produce a solution that is architecturally exciting and uplifting for the whole town.

I move on to another architecturally exciting British innovation—the roundabout. If Wimbledon is home to the Wombles, South Swindon is the land of the magic roundabout—a central roundabout surrounded by five satellite roundabouts. Swindonians nonchalantly negotiate the magic roundabout, whizzing clockwise round the outer circles and anti-clockwise round the central circle. A community that can do that without inflicting major harm on itself is capable of almost anything.

There is one conundrum in Swindon: it is a town and a people with much to be proud of—great community spirit, hard working and innovative, and home to some of our best national and international companies. It is a great place to live, yet Swindon has received a bad press over the years. I am calling time on that. Swindon has the potential to be a world-class community, and I shall be there as its cheerleader.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me in the debate, and I thank other Members for listening so courteously. It has been an exhilarating experience to enter Parliament as a new Member and, rather like negotiating the magic roundabout for the first time, we must keep our heads down, move forward with confidence, give way when necessary and go clockwise at all times unless it is necessary to go anti-clockwise. That is a good metaphor for a great institution.

2.17 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is my first and delightful duty to congratulate the hon. Member for South Swindon (Anne Snelgrove) on her maiden speech. Clearly, the people of South Swindon have gained another eloquent champion. Many of us on both sides of the House fondly remember her predecessor, Julia Drown, and the hon. Lady will be extremely welcome in the House. I can honestly tell her that I have never heard a better section of any speech about roundabouts.

I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches, including the hon. Members for Burnley (Kitty Ussher) and for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond). As one still young enough to remember my own maiden speech, but also as enough of an old lag to have addressed the House at every level of fullness and every stage of partisan excitement—even, sometimes, on occasions of wakefulness—I can tell them that they have gone through the most terrifying ordeal that they ever will in this place. The rest is easy.

I want to deal with two areas affecting the environment and one other aspect of the Queen's Speech. My overall verdict on the Government programme is that it shows alarming signs of hyperactivity, which is as wearing in a Government as it is in a small child. Forty-five Bills and five draft Bills are all to be put through the House by autumn next year. Given the parliamentary timetable, which, I observed during business questions, has been reduced again as we are having a longer summer holiday than we expected, there will probably be fewer than 40 weeks in which to discuss those 50 Bills. Are we likely to legislate well or wisely in those conditions? Of course not. The Government still seem to think, in the face of all evidence, that a bigger legislative programme means a better legislative programme. All our experience tells us that the opposite is the case.

The Prime Minister is entering his self-proclaimed political twilight desperately scrambling for a legacy. I am afraid that he will not find it in this collection of Bills, nor will he find it in his record on environmental matters. Climate change is one of the big issues for him—he has been known to declare that it is the biggest issue facing us. At other times, the biggest issue facing us can be education, Africa or terrorism. With all those issues, he is like a butterfly: he lands for a few seconds, flutters his rhetorical wings and is then away, leaving no imprint.

The Prime Minister and therefore the Government—I welcome the new Ministers to the environment team, both paid and unpaid; they can discuss the potential unfairness of that between themselves—have a genuine problem on this issue, but so, frankly, do all of us who are involved in the political process.

The biggest question facing the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—the two Departments whose work we are discussing today—is how we generate our energy and what effect that has on our environment. We have all known for a long time that that is the biggest problem facing them, yet we all chose not to discuss it during the election campaign.

I am not naive enough to believe that election campaigns can raise the tone of political discourse, but it is a melancholy comment on us all that, faced with a vital but complex and difficult issue, we all agree that this is not the sort of thing that we should be talking about in an election period. When we consider why people feel increasingly disengaged from and disenchanted with the political process, we should perhaps reflect on that. We have not discussed energy

and, in particular and most contentiously, the role of nuclear power until now, when the election is out of the way and we all feel it is safe enough to do so.

As has been pointed out not only by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Michael Jack) but by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber), there are two key questions in the debate on the role of nuclear power. First, can we meet our long-term emissions commitments without a new generation of nuclear stations? Clearly, the evidence can be used either way, but it seems to me that the answer to that question is probably not. Secondly, can we afford to build nuclear plants if we include the costs of waste? On the current evidence, the answer to that question is also probably not.

That is why this is clearly a complex and difficult issue, even before we get into the realm of all the passions aroused by the very idea of generating electricity using nuclear power. The cold economics seem to clash with the long-term international commitments, which we have rightly entered into, to reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases. That leaves us, as a country, facing in both directions: we cannot do without nuclear power, but we might not be able to afford it.

Clearly, we need to delve more deeply into those two questions and, in particular, into the question of affordability. On that, it seems to me that this country's time scale for going from the idea of building a nuclear power station in a particular area to the point at which that station might come on stream and start to generate electricity is ridiculously long. Broadly speaking, we assume that it takes 15 years from start to finish. If we started building some stations tomorrow, they would not be on stream in time to avoid the stresses and strains on electricity generation that we will face in the next decade, especially if we are to meet our long-term commitments. However, we know that we will not start building any new ones tomorrow, because we have taken so long to take the decision in principle.

It seems to me that some things could be done to reduce the time scale. First, we could change the planning procedure. We do not necessarily need lengthy public inquiries on new sites, because clearly we are now developing a range of sites that were involved in the original generation—in particular, Magnox reactors—and they could be reused.

My experience is based on the two reactors at Dungeness, which are not in my constituency, but in the neighbouring constituency of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). However, many of my constituents work at Dungeness and my experience tells me that, the reactors having been there for many decades, there is no local resistance to them or to the possibility of continuing nuclear generation there. Indeed, the reactors are welcome as a source of local employment, so some of the resistance that occurs in other areas would not be present.

The other aspect that lengthens the time scale for getting from idea to fruition is the technicalities of building, but we have reached the stage at which there are almost off-the-peg solutions that can be had. There are enough different types of nuclear generator around the world to enable that part of the process to be shortened. Therefore, we do not necessarily need to consider a 15-year time scale in future. That in itself would have some effect on affordability.

Moving to the other great problem—that of waste—there was a fascinating exchange in another place on 28 February between my noble Friend Earl Attlee and Lord Whitty. Earl Attlee asked whether the Minister thought that

"solving the waste problem and new build should be concurrent or consecutive activities."

Lord Whitty replied:

"setting us on the course to resolve the problem of radioactive waste is essential".—[*Official Report, House of Lords* 28 February 2005; Vol. 669, c. 10.]

The form of words used by the Minister is interesting. A complete resolution of the problem, which clearly would take some years, is not deemed necessary by the Government, only a "setting on course" to solving it. It may be that the Government have seen a way through this particular problem as well.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): I am new to the shadow energy portfolio, but precisely what is required to resolve the question of nuclear waste? Other countries appear to have resolved it. What do we wish to resolve? Is it a technical or scientific problem, or a political and economic one?

Damian Green: It is a bit of both, to be frank. We know that the technical problems have been solved by other countries and, logically, they can be solved here, because the geology is not that different. Clearly the problem is essentially political and my hon. Friend brings me to the point that I was going to make, one that was made also by the hon. Member for Amber Valley. There are reports that the Secretary of State has set her face against a new generation of nuclear stations, whatever happens. That is a point of view and not a disreputable one. Many hold it; I happen to disagree.

It seems to me that, if that is the view of one of the Ministers principally responsible for this area of policy, she might as well share it with the rest of us. If that is to be the Government's policy, all this debate is a waste of time. We can carry on discussing what would then be a very acute problem, which is how we are to increase the amount of other renewable sources to meet our commitments.

The other problem staring us fairly starkly in the face is that, at the current rate of progress, we will not meet our commitments using renewable energy and the Government will have to take a decision on that.

Norman Baker: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves nuclear power, may I ask him about the economics? In the late 1980s, his Government privatised electricity and it became apparent that nuclear energy was hopelessly uneconomic and that the private sector would not sustain it. Does he think that, if there were a new generation of nuclear stations, it should occur only if the private sector were prepared to take the risk or should the Government underwrite it?

Damian Green: The temptation to make future party policy from the Back Benches is almost irresistible, but I will resist it in the presence of the new shadow

[Damian Green]

Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). I dare say that, if the hon. Gentleman asks my right hon. Friend that question later, my right hon. Friend will take the sensible view that he has been in post for about three days and cannot be expected to make new policy.

The underlying point by the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) about the long-term expense is valid, but whether renewable sources are economic is also a moot point. Whichever way we go, it seems likely that some level of subsidy, or of market distortion that creates a subsidy, will be required, as it is now. The idea that the economic problem is purely for the nuclear industry is simply not true. It is true for all non-traditional forms of energy generation at the moment.

The only conclusion that one can draw is that we have had various learned committees sitting in various parts of this particular jungle for a long time, which, conveniently, have not reported before the general election. But the evidence gathering has been done and it is a matter of urgency that we get on with making a decision as fast as possible.

The other environmental issue on which I want to touch is relevant to the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill. The new integrated agency is meant to produce

"a healthy countryside, valued and used in a sustainable way."

Those are the Secretary of State's own words, and who could argue with them? The problem is that that is not what is happening in too many parts of our countryside.

My constituency is one of the areas on which the Deputy Prime Minister's vision of so-called sustainable communities is being foisted and the purely environmental effects—before we get into the social strains on public services—include the disappearance of green fields, increasing pressure on water supplies and sewage disposal, and increasing pressure to put buildings on the flood plain, none of which could be regarded as sustainable in any normal use of the word.

The root of this environmental vandalism, which will render irrelevant any good work by the new agency in areas such as mine, is the Government's attitude to house building as set out in the Barker review. The claim is that we need more house building and that the Government have accepted the Barker analysis that there is a long-term undersupply of housing. All the evidence points against that analysis. The average number of people per household continues to fall and the average space that people have in their homes is increasing. Overcrowding is declining and there are more homes than households. There is a surplus of some 670,000 houses in this country. It seems perverse to say that the answer is to build more and more houses when the thick end of 750,000 houses is empty. It appears obvious that demand factors, not the supply of housing, cause the stresses and strains on house prices. Trying to build our way out of the so-called housing crisis in the south-east of England will not solve the crisis but create—and is creating—a new environmental crisis. Any good work that might be done by the new agency—I wish it and the Ministers who will support it all the best—will be outweighed by other Government policies that are higher in the hierarchy of importance and cause great damage.

A major increase in house building will cause more greenhouse gas emissions, more noise and pollution associated with traffic growth, threats to wildlife and the possibility of greater flood risk and environmental damage through new water resources. I feel especially strongly about that because my constituency is in the forefront of suffering such environmental damage and I look forward to hearing the Secretary of State's explanation for why all that is necessary.

The third issue that I wish to raise is for another day but, being realistic, I suspect that I will not catch the Speaker's eye then. The identity cards Bill is to be reintroduced. It was a bad Bill in the previous Session and it is a bad Bill now. It will impose huge costs on individuals and taxpayers, restrict personal freedom and prove ineffective in the fight against terrorism and benefit fraud. The more arguments I hear from the Home Secretary, the worse they get. People have said that we are heading towards an Orwellian society. Orwell should not be our guiding text; if the scheme is ever adopted, it should be Kafka because people's identities will disappear. Anyone who has ever had to deal with problems related to the Child Support Agency's computers or any of the tax credit systems knows that they cannot cope. The proposed system will put huge amounts of sensitive personal information on to a Government computer, affecting everyone in this country.

John Bercow: The Government have consistently shifted their ground on the arguments for identity cards. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions took the biscuit when he said that their introduction would enable us to assert our sense of belonging? I have met many people in the Buckingham constituency in the past eight years who feel deprived of a sense of belonging, but no one has yet come up to me and said, "Mr. Bercow, I don't know who I am and I can't assert my sense of belonging because I have not yet been provided with my compulsory ID card by a Labour Government."

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes an especially powerful point. Few are as eloquent as he in expressing any point of view, but I may be able to trump him by quoting the Prime Minister. In 1995, the Prime Minister told the Labour party conference:

"We all suffer crime, the poorest and most vulnerable most of all, it is the duty of the Government to protect them . . . And instead of wasting hundreds of millions of pounds on compulsory ID cards as the Tory Right demand"—

he was wrong there—

"let that money provide thousands more police officers on the beat in our local communities."

I agree with that. The only point with which I take issue is the Prime Minister's comment about wasting hundreds of millions of pounds. Now he proposes to waste up to £10 billion on a system that is meant to protect us against terrorism but will not be operative until 2012 at the earliest. There is no argument for the Government's ID card scheme and I hope that hon. Members reject it.

Like all Queen's Speeches, this one is a mixture of the good, the bad and the irrelevant. There is no theme to it and no obvious vision of society. That should trouble thoughtful Labour Members. Above all, there is too

much in the Queen's Speech. Parliament will not be able to scrutinise the proposals properly and bad law will emerge at the end. That should be a matter of genuine regret for Members of all parties.

2.39 pm

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I should like to start by welcoming the maiden speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Kitty Ussher), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for South Swindon (Anne Snelgrove), and of the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond). I particularly want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley for giving me an insight into a procedure that I had not realised existed. She told me that her impending maternity, and the pact that she had made with the Speaker, had enabled her to speak early in the debate. I now realise just where I have been going wrong in my four years in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon mentioned roundabouts and circumlocution. Some years ago I stayed in Swindon. When trying to find my hotel, I experienced just what she was talking about today, so her words had particular resonance for me. I want to thank all those hon. Members because they clearly demonstrated the passion that they feel for the areas that they represent, and the dedication and commitment that they will display in the House when representing those constituencies.

I also want to thank the new Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, as well as those other Ministers who have appeared on the Front Bench at intervals today. They have already demonstrated their expertise in some areas and I look forward to working with them and lobbying them on issues that are particularly relevant to industry in my constituency.

West Bromwich, West is a heartland manufacturing constituency. Manufacturing industry still accounts for 30 per cent. of local employment there. It is also the constituency with the largest number of foundries. If ever an industry was symptomatic of traditional British industry, it is the foundry industry. Partly for that reason, I am the secretary of the parliamentary all-party group on cast metal.

The collapse of Rover has had an impact on my constituency. I do not want to rehearse the many arguments about that issue, but I want to make two points. Devastating though the collapse of Rover has been in some areas—my constituency is affected mainly in terms of the supply chain, rather than of people there being employed by the company, although there are some who were—that devastation would have been even greater had it taken place five years ago, before the supply companies had had the chance to diversify and refine their procedures in the way in which they have now done. I therefore pay tribute to the Department of Trade and Industry for the role that it has played in sustaining Rover for those five years. I am sorry that, in the end, it could be sustained no longer, but local employees attach no blame to the Government because they recognise the effort that the DTI made to keep Rover thriving and successful in the west midlands.

I have heard a lot of doom and gloom about manufacturing. The explanation put forward by the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) was that the tide of regulation was to blame for the decline in manufacturing in this country. I would be the first to say that there is an issue about regulation, and I shall talk about that in a moment. However, to single out regulation without referring to any other pressures is a distortion of industrial reality. The doubling of oil prices has hit industry, as have the soaring raw material prices that have resulted partly from the huge acceleration in the economies of China and India. Another factor is the competition from low-wage European and other companies that are increasingly taking on the lower-skilled industries here. Those factors are having a far more significant impact on British industry than regulation.

It is a tribute to the Government and their macro-economic policy, and the low interest rates and benign local economic environment that they have sustained, that manufacturing industry is surviving despite all the difficult international economic pressures. We can only speculate on what would have happened if manufacturing industry, having been confronted with the situation that arose under the Conservative Government 13 or 14 years ago, with interest rates at 10 and 15 per cent., had also faced the combination of international economic circumstances that it faces now. We would have experienced economic Armageddon: that, I think, goes without saying. It is indeed a tribute to the Government's management of the economy that notwithstanding those difficult international economic circumstances, they have managed to sustain employment and output. Our economy is seen by the rest of Europe as the most successful in western Europe and the G8. Thirteen or 14 years ago, we were regarded as the sick man of Europe in the context of a far more benign international economy.

The gloomy remarks about manufacturing are not reflected locally. My constant dialogue with the foundry industry has informed me that the industry is doing better, is more optimistic and has better prospects than has been the case for nearly a decade. Only a couple of years ago it was confronted with soaring scrap metal prices, a dearth of coke supply and a rise in other raw material costs. Those pressures have now been alleviated, partly as a result of the DTI's work through Europe and the World Trade Organisation in negotiating with China, which is now releasing more coke on to the market. The deceleration in the Chinese economy over the past year has taken some of the pressures from raw material prices, as well. Industrial prospects are much better locally, partly because of those developments.

All the evidence suggests that where foundries are moving into specialist niche markets requiring higher skills, they are surviving. In the past year, Hitachi Metals has opened the first new foundry in this country—in my constituency—for some years, producing high quality, environmentally friendly car exhaust systems. That is an interesting example of what can result from good investment and environmentally friendly quality techniques allied to traditional industry. We can survive, and I am confident that in my industry we will. Let me also make a general point. If foundries in my constituency are producing castings, other manufacturers must be using those castings and must be confident that their prospects justify the placing of orders. So it is not all doom and gloom.

[Mr. Adrian Bailey]

I must, however, mention an issue that has arisen in my constituency in the last few weeks—partly because of the Rover situation, but partly because of a company that I can only describe as a rogue employer. RDS Automotive Ltd. and RDS Automotive Interiors Ltd. supply both Rover and Jaguar. They knew that they would be in some difficulty when Rover closed and they embarked on redundancy negotiations with the employees. However, they said, and it was accepted, that they still had secure markets with Jaguar and that they would continue.

Suddenly, on 4 May, RDS Automotive Ltd. went into administration. Workers were informed that some would receive no redundancy pay and some would not even get paid for the work that they had done. On 5 May, another company, RDS Advanse Ltd. from the same group, bought that company, so a company that went into administration was bought by another in the same group, laid off workers and did not pay them. It is now recruiting other workers, starting with a clean balance sheet. It has not met any of its obligations.

I flag that up as an issue that the Government must confront in their company law and insolvency policy. I will lobby the Government and the DTI to take action on that matter. It is wholly unacceptable in this day and age that a group of employers and directors should close a company, absolve themselves of all their responsibilities, commitments and obligations to their employees, and try to start afresh with a different work force. It is an important issue that I will take up with the Government.

Local employers mention that regulation needs to be addressed by the Government. I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on the matter. The prime concern is that there is not sufficient consultation before the implementation of some of the European regulations. It is not always done badly—one of the good examples that I have had quoted to me was the introduction of the aggregates levy, where there was consultation and the industry felt that the outcome was satisfactory. There is particular concern in the metals industry about European legislation that is known as REACH: the registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals regulations. That was a specific issue with the chemical industry. My understanding is that in the discussions and negotiations between the industry and the Government, a more or less satisfactory position was reached. What was not appreciated was that the regulations could have an impact on the metals industry. There is concern that European legislation that was designed just for the chemical industry could have an impact on the metals and foundry industry. I ask the DTI to carry out a thorough consultative exercise to ensure that the European legislation is proportionate to the problem and that it reflects the difficulty that it may create for that industry.

John Bercow: Given that a former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for North Tyneside (Stephen Byers), declared as long ago, I think, as 1999 his conversion to the idea of sunset clauses, whereby legislation would automatically lapse or expire after a given period, can the hon. Gentleman provide some good and compelling examples since then of when the Government have used sunset clauses in legislation?

Mr. Bailey: The hon. Gentleman tempts me down a rather long and winding path, which I will not follow. Although a debate and discussion on sunset clauses may be needed, I am not sure that that is relevant to the point that I am making.

I wish to talk about another aspect of the Queen's Speech. It was mentioned in the background note: the so-called compensation culture. I welcome the comments on the need to address that matter. Although I am as committed as anyone to supporting good health and safety legislation, there are concerns in industry about the increasing use of frivolous and potentially expensive claims against companies and local and public authorities.

Two years ago, industry was hit by soaring employers' liability costs. There were a number of reasons for that. I would not put it down simply to the increase in the number of claims against them, but that was a contributory factor. That has been mitigated in part by companies improving their medical rehabilitation policies to pre-empt some of those claims. That has certainly taken pressure off industry. However, it remains a potential cost and driver of employers' liability insurance. More significantly perhaps, in my constituency it is an obstacle to getting industry and education together.

I am told by schools that teachers may have to fill in up to 40 forms to take children on a trip to a particular event. It makes me wonder whether we have the balance right. Foundries will not invite children to visit because of health and safety costs and the need to conform to regulations. It is essential that we fill young people with enthusiasm for science and industry. If regulations act as barriers preventing children from seeing industry and getting enthusiastic about it, we seriously need to do something about it. Will the relevant Ministries consider this issue? There is little point in investing large sums in scientific training if we do not also facilitate a connection between students and practitioners, so that those undergoing training want to practise what they have learned.

I have spoken for longer than I intended, but I feel passionately about some of these issues. In conclusion, first, the Government's macro-economic policy has been hugely beneficial to constituencies such as mine that were traditionally based on industry but suffered in the past. Unemployment has dropped and people are more prosperous. We are less dependent on manufacturing industry, which is to be welcomed. Secondly, the picture is not one of universal doom and gloom. We are still world leaders in any number of areas and we are surviving some of the most difficult international economic circumstances. Thirdly, I trust that the Government and the respective Ministries will ensure that regulation is designed to balance the need to promote industry with the need to promote health, welfare, healthy living and a good work-life balance. Ultimately, our prosperity and creativity are dependent on manufacturing industry. I look forward to the

Government promoting a regulatory regime that promotes that and helps constituencies like mine, which need it perhaps more than any.

2.58 pm

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my first speech to the House. I hope that the hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) will forgive me for not following him, although as the son of a Black Country foundry worker and as someone with an interest in compensation law, I am sorely tempted. Perhaps I shall do so on a different occasion.

First, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Anne Campbell. She served as Member for Cambridge for 13 years, in which time she made her mark as an excellent constituency MP. She helped a great many people who are grateful for her work. She also did a lot of work in this House to promote the discussion of science, for which she is to be praised. I also pay tribute to her predecessor, the late Sir Robert Rhodes James, a man of liberal temperament, deep erudition and great kindness.

Cambridge has had a turbulent political history. In the 19th century the seat changed hands many times between the Liberal and Conservative parties, frequently following the unseating of Members for corruption and bribery—I have to say, mostly Conservative Members. There have been a great number of very close elections, none closer than the second election of 1640—the election to what turned out to be the Long Parliament—when an opposition candidate was allegedly elected by a single vote. The name of the candidate elected was of course Oliver Cromwell, who sat for Cambridge in both the Short and the Long Parliaments.

Cambridge is then an ancient parliamentary borough, long represented in this House. The borough, now the city, of Cambridge is indeed older than the university of Cambridge. The city celebrated its 800th anniversary in 2001; the university will not celebrate its 800th anniversary until 2009. Nevertheless, the university of Cambridge is a major feature of the city. Despite its recurrent financial problems, it is still one of the world's leading universities—a fact perhaps better appreciated in other parts of the world than in this country. In this country, universities tend to be judged sometimes by stereotypical and outdated ideas about what kind of students attend them. In the rest of the world, a university's reputation rests on the quality of its research. On that basis, Cambridge university is still a force to be reckoned with.

However, Cambridge university is not the only university in Cambridge. Anglia Polytechnic university provides excellent higher education to a diverse group of students—students who will perhaps be even more adversely affected by increased tuition fees than those at the older university.

In sheer economic terms, however, higher education is no longer the most important activity in Cambridge. That title belongs to high-tech industry, which now employs tens of thousands of people in the city and nearby. The growth of high-tech industry in the past 30 years has transformed Cambridge. It is no longer a small market town with a university attached; it is an international centre of innovation in every sector of the new economy. It is a city of great diversity and energy.

However, there are also parts of Cambridge where tourists and business people rarely go that have not necessarily shared in the prosperity of the rest of the city—places with problems especially of housing and transport that are in some degree the result of economic success.

Cambridge is a city of high property values but ordinary salaries; a city of high bicycle usage, but one that is still plagued by traffic congestion. Housing is a pressing problem for many people. Many Cambridge families could not possibly afford to buy the property that they occupy. Many fear that their children will never be able to live in their own home in Cambridge. The pressure on social housing is immense. There is a crying need for more affordable housing. Subsidising buyers merely puts prices up even more. It is more housing that we need. I fear that in this I may differ to some extent with the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), although I should say that I agreed with every word that he said about identity cards.

Some hon. Members have said earlier in the debate, notably on Tuesday, but the Secretary of State said it in his opening remarks today, that the green belt should be preserved at all costs. I fear that there is some confusion here between "green belt" and "greenfield sites". I agree that greenfield sites should be the last development option, but green belt land is not necessarily greenfield land. The Cambridge green belt, as the Minister for Competitiveness, who is in his place, will doubtless remember, long included Cambridge airport. Far from an unused site, the airport borders the existing built-up area and many in local government believe that it would be an excellent site for a new urban extension to Cambridge, incorporating housing, open space, public transport and civic amenities.

Green belts are not always very green. The best environmental option is not always to prevent building on what is technically green belt land. Compact urban development can be more environmentally sustainable than spread-out rural and suburban development. Each case must be judged on its own merits.

Transport is at the centre of Cambridge's problems. Unusually, there has been a major increase in bus usage in the town, though the unregulated bus service is still letting some parts of the city down. Overall, Cambridge's public transport system is still that of a small market town rather than of a growth point in the new economy. We need major investment in infrastructure, but the system of local government finance means that we are unlikely to get it. The nationalisation of business rates and the obsession with centralised bidding for capital funding mean that we have to beg central Government for infrastructure funds—funds that the Government seem inclined to allocate elsewhere.

Areas of economic success such as Cambridge need backing. The Government can either back that success with money or, better still, restore financial independence to local government so that local government can do the job itself. Over-centralisation plagues this country, affecting all aspects of public services, including health and education. My

[David Howarth]

constituent, Lord Wilson, the former Cabinet Secretary, has spoken eloquently about the need to restore local democracy, and I agree with him. I want to see the culture of micro-management and control replaced by a culture of trust and democratic participation. If there is to be a theme to my time in the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is what I hope it will be.

3.7 pm

Mr. Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent, South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (David Howarth) and, indeed, other hon. Members on making their maiden speeches. It is an honour for me to rise to make my maiden speech on industry and the environment, not least because my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent, South has played a central role in our industrial heritage. Stoke-on-Trent continues to be a major player, particularly in ceramics, but in other areas, too. For example, this year sees the 100th anniversary of Michelin in the UK, and "the Mitch", as it is known, is an important employer in my constituency.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr. George Stevenson, who served the people of Stoke-on-Trent for many years—for the last 13 years as MP for Stoke-on-Trent, South, for 12 years before that as an MEP and before that as a councillor. Like me, George was not born in the city, but as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) said a few days ago,

"people who are converts to a place ... often become more strongly committed than those born into them."—[*Official Report*, 17 May 2005; Vol. 434, c. 36.]

A Yorkshire man by birth, George and his family moved to the city. In his time, he worked as a bus driver, miner and at the clay end in the Potts. He is a well-known figure in the city. Indeed, George is so well known that I had some concerns at one point about the size of our local schools, as on one day there must have been hundreds of people who said that they had been at school with George. Wherever one looks across the constituency, whether it be at rebuilding works, improvements or renewal, one can see a lasting testimony to George Stevenson.

It would be remiss of me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to talk about George without mentioning his wonderful wife, Pauline, so I want to take this opportunity of wishing them both a long and happy retirement.

It is a delight to live in Stoke-on-Trent, South. There is something almost magical about the place that, once in the heart, never leaves it. I have received kind letters of congratulation from the sons and daughters of the city, who have moved to other parts of the country but for whom Stoke-on-Trent is for ever their true home. My constituency represents many of the challenges and opportunities in Britain today. The skyline was once dominated by bottle kilns and winding gear, but alas those industries—like many traditional British industries—are no more, or are much reduced. However, the tremendous talent of the people lives on. On election day, I was honoured to share in the 80th birthday celebrations of Vera Leese, a former paintress. Vera embodies a creative talent that now shows itself in her superb fruit pies and cakes—the reason why I must now walk to the House rather than take the tube.

In the weeks leading up to the election, I was privileged to work with great community servants, such as Derek Bamford, Ian McLaughlan, Denver Tolley, Bagh Ali, Kath Banks, Stan Bate, Mike Tappin, Terry Doughty and Paul Shotton. With the help and support of my agent, Tim Mullen, and the hard work of many dedicated volunteers—to whom I will always be grateful—we visited many places. From the cold, dark, wet nights of winter to the brighter mornings of spring, the volunteers pounded the streets with me, from Caroline street to the Trentham road. Together we visited the Thursday market in Fenton and the indoor market and precinct in Longton, perhaps pausing to buy Eccles cakes—or, as they are affectionately known, dead fly pies. We walked many miles around Blurton, from Hollybush to Newstead. We met with the police and local residents at Sandford Hill. We spoke to the residents of the Meir, Coalville and Weston Coyney. We met retirement clubs, such as those at Meir Park community centre, Fenton community centre, and Pauline and the gang at the John Marston retirement club. We walked many miles in Trentham and Hanford and we journeyed around the whole constituency.

Stoke-on-Trent is starting once more to take its rightful place at the heart of Britain. For too many years our city was overlooked, but that is all changing. Unemployment has been slashed by 42 per cent. Brand-new schools are springing up in my constituency. Parents to whom I spoke during the campaign welcome the new investments in schools such as Blurton primary, The Crescent primary and Newstead primary—all brand-new schools. Parents told me of their delight at the new sports hall at Trentham high school, at St. Augustine's new kitchen and classroom, and at Glebe primary's new classroom block.

There is much work in progress. Sandon high is to be rebuilt, starting in September, and Clarice Cliff and Gladstone primary schools are in planning. Ash Green is getting an extension to its nursery and The Crescent is getting a brand new children's centre.

The constituency is also benefiting from new health facilities. The Willow Bank surgery opened in February of last year and patients have told me how they are able to have treatment there which previously would have needed a trip to hospital. Older members of the community have spoken to me about the new step-up, step-down beds at the refurbished Longton cottage hospital, which are making a tremendous difference to their recovery. Residents of Ripon road told me during the campaign about the significantly refurbished Blurton health clinic. That is not to mention the £370 million university hospital in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher)—a brand-new hospital to serve the needs of the whole region. A lot has been done, but a lot more remains to do, and I shall press for the new Fenton health centre to be up and running by the end of the year.

As well as improvements in health and education, I shall take up the challenge of pressing for more and better quality jobs in my city. I want to see new employers coming into places such as Trentham Lakes, and our existing employers being helped to expand and take on more staff. Over the next three years, £100 million of regeneration funding is being made

available. I shall hold the regeneration zone board closely to account to make sure that that money is spent well and fully used for the benefit of my constituents.

Many communities such as the Meir, Coalville, Blurton and Normacott now have the chance of decent housing and community facilities through RENEW's £2.3 billion programme, but many residents have told me that they have concerns about how that programme will affect them. I must declare an interest here as a resident of the Meir. I have already given a commitment to my fellow residents that while we must not pass over the opportunity of a generation that that money affords, the plans must be for the good of the people, not for the good of the architects.

Stoke-on-Trent has given this country many great people, from Reginald Mitchell, designer of the Spitfire, to Clarice Cliff, ceramics artist. In fact, it is time that this country recognised Reginald Mitchell for the national hero that he is. The very least we could do is to honour him with a statue here in our nation's capital.

Stoke-on-Trent has also produced diverse musicians. For those with a classically trained ear—perhaps—they include Motorhead's Lemmy, Slash from Guns N' Roses and, of course, Robbie Williams. Other famous figures range from the ill-fated Captain E. J. Smith of the Titanic to possibly the greatest English footballer, Sir Stanley Matthews.

Stoke-on-Trent has other heroes. I shall keep with me an enduring image—that of the Treetops children's hospice run by the Donna Louise trust. In the week before the election, the hospice held an open day and I was shown around by one of the bereavement counsellors. In circumstances in which many people would, I suspect, find it impossible to cope, a dedicated team of staff and volunteers give hope and happiness to young people and their families. The trials and difficulties of an election campaign pale into insignificance when compared with the strength of the users and carers of Treetops—an organisation that depends on charitable donations.

The good people of Stoke-on-Trent, South have an optimistic future and I welcome Members to the city to enjoy its finest hospitality and a warm welcome, perhaps at "The Malt and Hops". They will see for themselves what it is to be truly proud of Stoke-on-Trent.

3.15 pm

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Queen's Speech debate. It is an honour to follow the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Flello) and for Cambridge (David Howarth) whose maiden speeches we have just heard. Both Members expressed an interest in schooling, which made me prick up my ears as education is an important subject for me. I should be delighted to invite them to Bournemouth so that we can compare notes. I appreciate that Stoke-on-Trent and Cambridge are some distance away, but if the hon. Gentlemen could get to Shropshire, the new high-speed police escort service that is under trial there could make their journey to Bournemouth much quicker. Congratulations to both on their excellent maiden speeches.

It is indeed an honour to be elected to represent Bournemouth, East. I stand here with mixed emotions. I am humbled by the surroundings in which I find myself, but enthusiastic to join 54 Conservative Members—fresh horses and keen to hold the Government to account. I am conscious of the responsibility that the people of Bournemouth have bestowed on me and I am committed to working with my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Sir John Butterfill), who already has much experience in the House. I am grateful to him.

Many Members will be familiar with Bournemouth, as it is a seaside town on the party conference circuit. However, it offers much more than eight miles of glorious beaches and a major conference centre. There is a thriving business sector, with small and large businesses and a focus on financial services. There is also a cultural focus in the form of Shelley manor, built by the family of the poet. It includes a small theatre that is currently being renovated. Bournemouth can also lay claim to one of the best NHS trusts in the south.

There is a vibrant tourism industry but, alas, no donkeys at present. If people want donkeys they still have to go to Blackpool. However, I understand that a new EU working directive will change that and give donkeys better working conditions, so no doubt we shall see many more donkeys at the next party conference.

Bournemouth boasts some of the highest education standards in the country. I do not want to be too controversial in my maiden speech but I made the funding of Bournemouth schools a priority during the election campaign. I visited several schools; for example, Queen's Park infant school, Epiphany primary school, Avonbourne, St. Peter's and Pokesdown. Two themes were common in my visits to all those schools: first, the high standard of education and the commitment shown by teachers and, secondly, the harsh financial conditions that the schools face. I should be grateful for the chance to meet an Education Minister at the earliest opportunity to discuss how Bournemouth's funding settlement can be increased so that we retain the highest standards of teaching and education.

Bournemouth is also home to a great football club—AFC Bournemouth is in the first division and was pipped at the last game by Hartlepool for a place in the play-offs. Like many clubs in the constituencies of other Members, it is a focal point not only for football but many other sporting and community activities. Like other non-premiership clubs, the club's sporting successes are unfortunately marred by the financial constraints that it faces. Clubs such as AFC Bournemouth now look to the FA cup almost as a mini-lottery, hoping to be drawn against a premier league club simply to balance the books. In fact, Bournemouth were drawn against Liverpool in the fourth round, but unfortunately Liverpool, perhaps knowing that they might be confronted with playing Bournemouth, lost their first-round replay match, thereby denying Bournemouth the crucial financial support that they need.

I was not alive when England won the World cup, but I am told that the win in 1966 was a huge boost to British sports, not only football, and that even for non-sports enthusiasts the feel-good factor in England was contagious. I was born a few months afterwards, and it may well be that I have a lot to thank that feel-good factor for. If we are ever to win a World cup again, we must invest in home-grown talent and ensure that we

[Mr. Tobias Ellwood]

support such non-premier league clubs as AFC Bournemouth, especially as they play such an active role in our communities.

Like many seaside towns, Bournemouth must now compete with holiday destinations abroad because the cost of travel has dropped. Low-cost airlines are making places such as Bournemouth compete with the likes of Berlin and Barcelona. Bookings for weekend holidays, let alone holidays for an entire week, have reduced as it is so much cheaper to travel abroad. Tourism is Bournemouth's biggest industry. The town has so much potential but is unfortunately denied the ability to explore new ways to deal with that competition and to pursue its own strategy to pursue visitors. I am afraid that the reason why it is held back, again without being too controversial in my maiden speech, is the growth in the power base of the South West regional assembly, which has taken power away from councils and given it to Taunton, denying councils the ability to decide their own strategy for the future. The biggest example is the threat to the green belt area around Bournemouth, where 13,000 more homes are being planned. I am not a supporter of the South West regional assembly. Bournemouth deliberately became a unitary authority in 1997 so that it could control its own future. I should like more power to be given to councils instead of having larger local government outside the area.

As in other town centres around the country, pubs and clubs have sprung up in Bournemouth at a rate that is altering the character of the town. In Bournemouth's case, this is deterring families from visiting the area in the evenings. I am not saying that we should not have any pubs or clubs—far from it—but the local council needs to have more control over how the character of the town develops. Pubs and clubs generally lead to the development of a yob culture and the drinking that occurs on Friday and Saturday nights, and I am afraid that Bournemouth is no exception. On a Friday night, half the police are forced to focus on the quarter of a square mile where all the nightclubs are based.

One idea that came up during the election campaign is that of imposing a levy on pubs and clubs to pay for the extra policing that is needed, so freeing up the police to cover the rest of the town. The concept is not new—it is already used at football matches, where the extra policing that one sees is not paid for by taxpayers who are not necessarily there but out of ticket sales. That idea could be explored for Bournemouth, and I would very much welcome the opportunity to work with the council in order to pursue this.

When the Prime Minister opened the Queen's Speech debate, he mentioned the role of the police community support officer. I have spent time with many agencies in Bournemouth, including the police and CSOs, but have yet to meet a CSO who would not jump at the opportunity of ditching that uniform and wearing the uniform of a special constable—if special constables were paid a salary. In Bournemouth, only one third of the quota for specials is met. Were we to pay them a salary, we would benefit from their better training, their power to make arrests, and meet the policing needs in Bournemouth.

Before I end and pay tribute to my predecessor, I want to make a comment about the identity cards Bill, similar to that which my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) made. We await the detail of the Government's proposals, but having served in the armed forces and, sadly, having lost a brother in the Bali bomb, I take a great interest in any legislation that aims to deal with the threat of terrorism. I am trying to keep an open mind on the issue, but I have yet to be convinced that a Bali-style attack in the UK could be prevented by the introduction of ID cards.

My predecessor, David Atkinson, was a loyal and dedicated MP for Bournemouth, East for 28 years. His commitment to Bournemouth was reflected in almost every street I visited during the election. It was impossible not to bump into someone who sang his praises or said that in one way or another he had helped them during his 28 years' tenure. He introduced a number of private Member's Bills, including a fireworks Bill, and spent 25 of those 28 years as a member of the Council of Europe.

It is interesting to note that during his time as an MP, David Atkinson never owned a mobile phone, a computer or a Blackberry—those new devices with which we all seem to be issued these days. It is therefore surprising to learn that it was he who made the announcement in the House about the threat of the Y2K bug—the big issue leading up to the year 2000, when it was feared that all our computers would crash. How on earth he came upon that information, I do not know, but his reluctance to harness IT never prevented him from dealing with constituency matters. Perhaps the lesson for us all is that we should not be so reliant on the IT equipment that we are given.

It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. I might add that the pen is also mightier than the Blackberry, because if one loses one's pen, one simply loses one's train of thought. If one loses one's Blackberry, one loses one's life—temporarily, at least—as I found out the hard way, and I am grateful to the staff of the Members' Tea Room for reuniting me with my Blackberry and making sure that I did not get into trouble with the Whips. Despite all the high-tech gadgetry that MPs are now armed with, David Atkinson proved that what is important is not so much the speed with which constituency matters are dealt with, or the turnover, but the quality of the response and the pursuit of a solution. I hope hon. Members will join me in wishing David Atkinson well in his retirement. I am pleased that he has chosen to retire in Bournemouth, as he will not be too far away if I have any questions or advice to seek.

I conclude by underlining my opening words. It is an honour to be elected as the Member for Bournemouth, East. I believe that good politics is about the accountability of power. I am encouraged by Mr. Speaker's opening remarks earlier this week about the role that this place plays in our democratic process. It is here that announcements of state should be made, it is here where those debates should take place, and it is here that Government should be held to account.

Good politics is about the accountability of power and how that power is wisely distributed, exercised and maintained. I hope to be guided by these words as I undertake the responsibility of Member of Parliament for Bournemouth, East. I am grateful to the people of

Bournemouth, East for giving me this opportunity to work with and represent them to the high standard that they expect and deserve, as Bournemouth meets the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

3.28 pm

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) on his impressive speech. The last three speeches have all been maiden speeches and have all been excellent. All the Members will make their mark in the House. I hope that they do, and I wish them well in that process. I congratulate all who have made their maiden speeches in the House today.

Labour's election manifesto was fine, up to a point. The Queen's Speech is fine, up to a point. The manifesto was published during the election campaign, following a restrictive system for what went in it. Anyway, it was too late to put such commitments into local campaigning literature or into an election address. The pledges on the pledge card were so general this time that they amounted in worth to only one day's spin. I did not use them.

However, what a manifesto does not contain can be as important as what it does. Last time, there was no indication that the Government would support a war as foolhardy as the one in Iraq, and what was said about tuition fees was quite different from what was actually proposed. Something similar could happen this time. The Leader of the Opposition struck a chord when he said that some of the new policies announced in the Queen's Speech had a familiar—and he suggested Tory—ring.

I fought the election not on a new Labour ticket, but on a Labour ticket. I do not feel bound by an unremittingly new Labour agenda. I welcome the commitments to education that were contained in an e-mail sent to candidates, but which did not appear in the manifesto. Under "Building Schools for the Future", over the next 15 years it is proposed to rebuild completely, or refurbish radically with new classrooms, sports halls and computer centres, more than 50 per cent. of our primary schools and the entire secondary school estate of every local authority in the country. I also welcome the promise that spending per pupil will rise from £3,850 to £5,500 by 2008. More pre-school and after-school clubs are also promised, as are better school meals, and I welcome that too, as I do the intention to provide 3,500 children's centres by 2010. Moreover, the aim is to make extended schools—with much more widespread links with the communities that they serve than is presently the case—the norm rather than the exception

Improved education, with opportunity for all and not just an elite, is a true Labour objective that I am happy to support. However, how does effective private control and, perhaps, ownership of city academies—funded overwhelmingly with taxpayers' money—square with that? I wait to see exactly what is proposed.

John Bercow: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to feel alone. If he was not guided exclusively by the contents of his party's manifesto, I can assure him that I was not exclusively guided by the contents of mine.

Harry Cohen: The hon. Gentleman makes his point. The Opposition have needed lessons in opposition since 1997.

I am also wary of the first proposal made by the new Health Secretary, which was no doubt required of her by No. 10. The proposal is to increase massively the number of private operations contracted for by the NHS. She said that she foresaw no limit—presumably up to 100 per cent.—to the number of such operations carried out in the private sector. In the short term, that may lead to more operations being carried out, given the amount of money being pumped in, but the effect on the NHS, in the medium and long term, would be bad.

Consultants will set up private companies to feed off the NHS. Their services will not be available in-house in NHS hospitals, and in-house provision is likely to be wound down in direct proportion to the expansion of those private companies. In due course, those companies will charge what they like and the NHS will be over a barrel. The care offered by the private companies is likely to be more expensive than NHS in-house provision were that to be similarly expanded, with more resources, for the same number of operations.

However, what really alarmed me was the new Labour rhetoric that uncompetitive local hospitals could close as part of the process. Communities need their local hospitals. If any hospitals are not running efficiently, it is the job of the health executives and the Government to ensure that they become efficient. It is not their job to close them. What we have is the Nicholas Ridley agenda applied to the NHS, where the state is seen as an agent or enabler, not the provider. Increasingly, the private sector is the provider. The NHS has worked well as a provider of health care, achieving results for the amount of resources put in that are a lot better than is the case in other countries. It does not need this sort of reform, which I have considerable doubt will be for the better.

I give the Government the benefit of the doubt on identity cards. Before the election, I voted for the cards in principle, but the devil is in the detail. Another example of that might be the children's registers: the intention is good, but the Government must do the necessary work to ensure that they operate properly. Care must be taken about the data that are kept and who is allowed access, and proper provision must be made for the correction of inaccurate information. Moreover, the purposes of the registers must be made clear and not continually added to. If the Government do not do that necessary work, the project could end up discredited and unable to fulfil its intended goals. If that happens, it will be an expensive failure.

There is also a case for a carefully calibrated policy on incapacity benefit. Nobody wants malingerers to freeload and nobody wants seriously ill people to be denied their benefit, but there are a lot of people in between. In my constituency, some 6 per cent. of the working population are on incapacity benefit. As an urban area, it is a tough place to live. The living environment, let alone the working one, is tough. It makes people sick, even if that sometimes manifests itself in just an inability to cope at anything other than a low level. To be brutally frank, many such people are mentally sick or inadequate when held up against what we want of them: to work and to cope for themselves. Tougher invalidity rules would be unfair to them. I favour the option, suggested by the Government, of seeking to help such people remove the obstacles to working, but we should not be swift to punish them by

[Harry Cohen]

cutting off their benefit if the process turns out to be a slow one. There still remains the suspicion that the Government's main objective is to move swiftly to cut the overall invalidity bill, so the detail of the proposals will need to be scrutinised very carefully.

Local government workers, key workers, teachers, nurses and health care professionals must have secure pensions. They have paid in over the years for their pension rights, and the terms of those rights have been successfully negotiated by their representatives. It is not right that the Government should take a heavy-handed approach and adversely change such pension rights. There must be proper talks and negotiations with the public service trade unions, and agreed solutions must be reached. Public sector workers are paid relatively low wages for the important public service that they perform, and their pensions should be protected. I will not support a fast fix that seriously penalises such workers.

The Government must also take action to protect the pensions of people who work in the private sector. Effective robbery from pension savings by fat-cat directors of finance companies—who take excessive salaries and dividends for themselves, even when the savings that they are managing are underperforming—must be stopped. The whole commission system is now seen as lining the pockets of the financial adviser, against the interests of the saver. Employers have not contributed properly to pension funds, taking long contribution holidays for themselves and worsening their workers' pension rights when the funds failed to match commitments.

Finance capital associated with the stock exchange has brought about a depletion in pension funds, without the stock exchange being accountable. There is no transparency in its performance. The Government have stood by and said, "This is a private sector matter, not a matter for us." Individuals saving more for their old age are increasingly mooted as a major factor in any future system, but that will not be a solution if they can so easily be robbed of their money as is currently the case. If the Government want a savings culture, they must get rid of the corporate robbery culture. According to a report in *The Independent* of 12 April, the Prime Minister bowed to pressure from business and shelved the threat of compulsory employer pension contributions until a fourth Labour term of office. If so, that was an irresponsible capitulation. In any workable solution, employers must pay more and pay consistently.

I wish to discuss three other matters, the first of which is Iraq. Some 100,000 Iraqis have been killed and the country has been plunged into the hands of militant insurgents. Execution-style murders have become a new trend in the violence in Iraq; some 450 people have died in that way so far in May alone. The desperate security situation is matched by the almost non-existent administrative infrastructure. There has been no serious effort at reconstruction or at rebuilding Iraq for the people. There has been no clear-up of cluster bomblets or of other unexploded ordinance. Iraq's resources, most notably oil, continue to be plundered. Deplorably, proper plans to follow "shock and awe" were non-existent, and the Iraqi people continue to suffer.

Moreover, we have lost 87 UK service personnel in Iraq. Those troops and their families, along with Iraqis and all the others who have been killed or maimed, are the victims of a decision to go to war that was taken on a false premise, and on legal advice deliberately changed under pressure that did not properly reflect the illegality of the action. The policy and the interpretation of the law were left to the Prime Minister, and he interpreted the United Kingdom's national interest as being to side, come what may, with the warmonger in the White House. The national interest, from now on, must be what the British people want and need, not what a right-wing Republican President of the United States wants.

I continue to support the campaign to bring the troops home at an early opportunity. That is not cutting and running, but facing up to our responsibility to bring about a solution. There can be none while foreign troops—ours and those from the United States—are there in occupation. We have to pay for our mistakes and to help to build Iraq, even after we have left, but we need not pay with the loss of more lives.

On 2 May, *The Independent* disclosed the Government's plan to develop and deploy new nuclear weapons. That is hardly visionary, although it is par for new Labour. Nor is it for the good. As Robert McNamara, the United States Secretary of Defence during the Kennedy and Johnson eras, has said, human fallibility and nuclear weapons mean the destruction of nations. The policy would also doom non-proliferation efforts to failure, as the non-proliferation treaty was a bargain between those nations who agreed not to develop nuclear weapons and those states with nuclear weapons who agreed to eliminate them. The unnecessary holding of nuclear weapons—indeed, the development and deployment of seemingly smaller, usable weapons—fuels proliferation. It will lead to the solution of perpetual Iraq-style wars and occupations against unfavoured states, while favoured states such as Israel, India and Pakistan will continue to expand their nuclear arsenals until they either become unfavoured or use them.

Nuclear weapons will be used if we take that route. It is not a sustainable policy. We must return to treaty, international law and inspection arrangements. That must include our properly meeting our NPT commitments. That should mean that the option of a new generation of nuclear weapons for Britain is out. Otherwise, we shall have the hypocritical spectacle of a British Prime Minister falsely accusing another country of having weapons of mass destruction while he is authorising a big expansion of his own.

Nuclear power is my last matter. I strongly support the Government's renewable energy policy of getting 10 per cent. of electricity from renewable sources by 2010. We are below 3 per cent. at present. The Government must use compulsion and invoke the national interest, as they did with the immigration and asylum centre in Oxford, to ensure that there are sufficient wind and wave farms and that there are solar panels in all newly built homes. It would not be right to abandon that and to switch to building new nuclear power stations. Many such as myself suspect that that option is returning to the table only to supply a discreet means of sourcing the new nuclear weapons programme. Nuclear power is hugely wasteful. The cost to the British taxpayer of its debts and of clean-up is

counted in billions of pounds. It spreads radioactivity. There is the risk of a Chernobyl-type disaster, and there is still no safe disposal option for nuclear waste. It is not the solution. We must press ahead more insistently on wind, wave and sun power, and not be fooled by the allegedly easy nuclear option.

I echo a point that someone once made—we govern best when we are Labour. We should now govern as Labour, not new Labour.

3.43 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I am grateful for being called in the Queen's Speech debate. May I dare say, however, that this Queen's Speech is almost beyond parody, if not beyond criticism? That could not, of course, be said of the speech that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen), who demonstrated to us the duty and job of a Member of Parliament, whether he be a member of the Labour party or any other. That duty and job is primarily to speak up for his constituents in this Chamber and to hold the Government to account. If he did anything, he made a speech on his feet and not on his knees, and I was delighted to hear it. I cannot say that I agree with everything he had to say, but he demonstrated to those of us who have been Members of the House for some while and those who have been Members for only a few days what it is that a Member of Parliament should do. Accountability is what we are about, and holding those on the Treasury Bench to account. I hope that more Members during this Parliament will behave as he does and as he did today. I congratulate him on his speech.

I also congratulate others who have spoken in today's proceedings. My hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) and for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) made powerful and fluent speeches, and it is a delight to see them here and to hear what they have to say. It was particularly pleasing to hear what they had to say about their predecessors, who are well known to those of us who were Members in the last Parliament and saw at first hand the service that they gave the House.

Roger Casale, the previous Labour Member for Wimbledon, was, with me, co-chairman of the Anglo-Italian parliamentary group. I got to know him on that level very well, and I know he will be sorely missed in the Italian group, but he has provided us with a sterling replacement in my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon. I look forward to hearing a lot more of what he has to say on matters of great public concern, as I do in respect of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East, who gave us a telling insight into how he will represent his Bournemouth constituents. They are lucky to have him.

Other contributions came from the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Flello), for Cambridge (David Howarth), for Burnley (Kitty Ussher), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for South Swindon (Anne Snelgrove), all of whom spoke with great fluency and entirely fearlessly, as far as I could see, as well as with great pride in their election and the fact that they are here to represent their constituents. I feel sure, having heard them all, that they will be assiduous representatives of their constituents in this place. I am sure, irrespective of our political differences, that we will find their contribution to debate, as well as their desire to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise with great care the legislation that they spew forth, to be one of their most proud duties.

If I may, I shall pick up on one or two paragraphs in this document, the Queen's Speech, and then talk about a matter of concern to me, which was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green).

Rustling through this printed speech, one sees some things that are unobjectionable, some that are meaningless and some that one could probably support. Little appeals to me less, however, than the paragraph that states:

"Education remains my Government's main priority."

Tell that to the people of Leicestershire, who, yet again, have been placed at the bottom of the Whitehall funding stream for local education authorities. Why do this Government think it costs any less to educate a child, maintain the fabric of a school or buy equipment and text books in Leicestershire than in the city of Leicester? Why are city of Leicester parents queuing up to bring their children to Leicestershire schools, and why are they not permitted to bring the additional money that the city LEA gets with them to the schools in the county? Education remains the main priority of Her Majesty's Government.

The Queen's Speech says:

"My Government will continue to reform the National Health Service in a way that maintains its founding principles."

Tell that to the people in my constituency queuing up to find an NHS dentist. Tell it to the people of Scarborough, who were queuing half way round the block just before the election when a new NHS dental practice started up in the town.

The Queen's Speech also says:

"A Bill will be brought forward to support patients who wish to seek redress should they experience problems with their healthcare."

It will be interesting to see whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer provides the additional funding for legal aid so that the less well off in our society can bring complaints, legal or otherwise, against the health service. It will also be interesting to discover whether the Chancellor allows the Secretary of State for Health the additional funds required to pay the damages, as well as the lawyers and administrators who will have to deal with all those complaints.

The Queen's Speech also states:

"My Government will begin long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement."

I have no idea—nor, I suspect, do the Government—what is meant by the word "sustainable", but my constituents who used to work for British United Shoe Machinery would be interested to know what on earth the Government intended by that sentence. The hon. Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks), who has left the Department for Work and Pensions for the Department of Trade and Industry, did something to assist those facing penury in retirement following the collapse of a number of company pension schemes, but clearly it was not enough. I look forward to seeing more of the detail, rather than the soundbites, on pensions.

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

A large section of the Queen's Speech deals with Home Office matters, which I shall leave until next week when I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) will have much to say. There is plenty to criticise and I was pleased to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford had to say on a number of Home Office issues.

We are faced yet again with the awful adjective "sustainable" when one reaches the third page of the Gracious Speech, which states:

"My Government is committed to achieving sustainable development and supporting rural services."

I am not at all sure what that is supposed to mean but we will find out in due course, either from the Secretary of State or from other Ministers. On supporting rural services, I hope that the Government realise how difficult it is now to operate as an economic unit or as a profit-making farm in rural areas. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) has moved from shadowing the Chancellor to shadowing the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He will be able to bring to bear his experience as a constituency Member for a rural and farming area, with which he will bring his great ability to focus with great tenacity on Government waffle.

I shall return to ask the Government about what they propose to do to protect the natural environment in the context of a matter that the Secretary of State and myself share: concern for the activities of Nottingham East Midlands airport. My constituency is approximately 20 to 50 miles to the south east of the airport and hers is 20 miles, or perhaps less, to the north-west of an airport that needs a lot of careful watching.

In due course, I want to find out what is meant by another wonderful piece of Government language:

"A Bill to modernise the management of common land".

When I hear a Labour Government talking about modernising and management, I tend to think that they mean nationalisation or bringing into Government control. I hope that I can be disabused of that. *[Interruption.]* I see the Minister for Climate Change and the Environment laughing. Not many of my constituents had much to laugh about as regards the Government's conduct towards them, but I look forward to him persuading me that my cynicism about the language of the speech as placed into the mouth of Her Majesty is misplaced. I know that he personally is committed to environmental issues and has a long and proud record on these matters, but a Bill to modernise the management of common land sets off alarm bells in my mind.

The Queen told us:

"My Government is committed to promoting efficiency, productivity and value for money."

That is probably one of the funniest parts of the speech. I could take any number of Ministers to the small companies in my constituency—Harry Darby Engineering Ltd, Okay Engineering Ltd and Invicta Plastics Ltd are but three. They are small in that they are not like ICI or vast international companies. Their turnovers are in the few millions rather than the billions or hundreds of millions. However, those three companies, which I visited for the second time recently, complained about the massive burden of red tape, bureaucracy and Government interference with which they had to cope while trying to make a profit in the manufacturing sector in the east midlands.

Some of the small companies in my constituency are suppliers to the west midlands automotive sector. Some have been gravely embarrassed by the collapse of MG Rover. I look forward to hearing how the Government's desire to promote efficiency, productivity and value for money will translate into an economic climate and a manufacturing environment that allow those companies to thrive rather than follow MG Rover to the far east.

While flicking through the speech, I came across the following sentence:

"Legislation will be brought forward to encourage greater voter participation in elections while introducing further measures to combat fraud and increase security."

It is a pity that the Government did not follow the Electoral Commission's advice before the election rather than wringing their hands now. It did not take a genius to work out that encouraging greater voter participation should not mean voters voting more than once in a constituency or people delivering bucket loads of postal votes to factories where they could be processed in the most convenient way for whichever political party happened to be managing that vote factory. The Electoral Commission foretold all that either directly or implicitly, yet all the pointers that were given to the Government to warn them about the previous measure were ignored. Perhaps the Government should beware because, this time, the public will not give them a second chance.

Trust, truth and accountability are the themes that we should ensure that the Government follow. On trust, the Government should not do or promise things that they simply cannot deliver. We are fed up with having to listen to soundbites and with government by gimmick, while our taxes rise and the delivery of our public services does not improve.

On truth, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead mentioned his concerns about the conduct and planning of the Iraq war. I spoke a great deal about that in the previous Parliament and I shall not repeat today what I said then. However, there is much for which the Government can be criticised in the way in which they took the House's trust and abused it in their advance towards the war in Iraq. The Government appear to have forgotten about accountability and I hope that speeches such as his will remind them of what they are supposed to be doing. The Executive happen to sit in the Chamber but they should not sit on it. I look forward to a new sort of government—a new new Labour Government—in this Parliament, which respects the balance in our constitution and the separate role that each aspect of our constitution plays.

I do not want to hear a Home Secretary making offensive remarks about the quality of our judges in public. I do not want to hear a Home Secretary making ridiculous and normally ignorant remarks about the length of specific sentences after a court case in which only the judge and not the Home Secretary has heard the evidence. I do not want to have to listen to Ministers saying, "We were elected on this manifesto by an overwhelming popular mandate", given the figures for this election. I do not want to hear Ministers telling the House or journalists, "We gave ample time for this

particular measure to be properly looked at; it was discussed at length" only to read on the Order Paper the following day, "Such and such a measure [no debate after 10 pm]" or "[no debate]" or to find that measure subject to a guillotine motion.

Towards the end of the last Parliament, this place became a farce in terms of its ability to scrutinise Government legislation. I would have thought that a Government who had a majority of 165 would have had the self-confidence to allow their ideas to be tested. Some of their ideas are perfectly good and deserve to be passed into law, but all their policies deserve to be looked at and tested, and some deserve to be tested to destruction. In the last Parliament—I trust that it will not happen in this one—the Government resorted to guillotining everything all the time. Legislation such as the Criminal Justice Act—

Margaret Beckett: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Garnier: May I just finish this sentence? I will then, of course, give way to the right hon. Lady, because I want her support when I come to discuss East Midlands airport.

The Bill that became the Criminal Justice Act 2003 was the size of a London telephone book, yet it was barely looked at either on the Floor of the House or in Committee. It then had to be dealt with far more thoroughly in the other place. That cannot be a sensible way for a sensible Government to produce sensible legislation.

Margaret Beckett: I have heard such moans from Conservative Members on a number of occasions. Anyone who has been here for a long time—I do not recall when the hon. and learned Gentleman was first elected—would acknowledge that the procedures that this Government introduced in the Parliament that ended in 2001 to improve the handling of legislation have unquestionably done that. I remind him that some very senior Conservative Members who are extraordinarily respected on both sides of the House have long expressed the view that the processes of the House, by which we used not to examine many parts of Bills, were wholly undesirable. They felt that to have a structure that facilitated scrutiny—to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the seriousness of the chunk of the Bill in question—of all elements of the legislation was a huge improvement. It is ridiculous of Conservative Members to pretend otherwise. I sat on the Opposition Benches when the Conservative Government whom the hon. and learned Gentleman supported introduced a whole new section into a social security Bill, to get rid of widows' pensions, after a guillotine. I really do not want to hear these criticisms from the Conservatives, because they are totally unjustified.

Mr. Garnier: I am happy to be criticised when that criticism is justified and based on fact. For the right hon. Lady's information, I got into the House in 1992. I accept that the history of this Parliament is not a history of perfection. It does not matter whether we are talking about a Conservative Government or a Labour Government; both can be criticised for curtailing debate, because they sit in the Chamber and want their business to get through,. However, the way in which the guillotine process has been extended during recent years is wholly unforgivable and represents the destruction of our parliamentary processes and the undermining of our democratic system.

The right hon. Lady, as a member of the Government since 1997, has no doubt had plenty to do, in her various Departments, throughout the country and on the world stage. I, on the other hand, have had the opportunity since I left the Front Bench four years ago to spend more time in the Chamber, more time studying the Order Paper, and more time in Standing Committees than perhaps she has. I can tell her that it is not just my experience but that of people across the Chamber in all parties that we are dissatisfied with the way in which legislation is pushed through the House. Of course, she has a mandate to get her business through. Fair enough. But she ought to have the self-confidence—when I say "she", I mean the Government as a whole—to allow Parliament to do its job, and to listen to people such as the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead and me. She might not like what I have to say, and she might disagree with my arguments, but the House is not and should not be a sausage machine. It should be a place in which legislation is considered, and in the last part of the last Parliament, it manifestly was not. It became an embarrassment, and if she does not know that, she should do.

John Bercow: Does my hon. and learned Friend recall that, in the last Parliament and the one that preceded it, it was commonplace for the Government to table large numbers of amendments and new clauses to their own legislation on Report? When Conservatives and other Members complained that there was not enough time to debate them, it was common for Ministers—not a Minister of the experience and celebrity of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but a number of her colleagues—to say that the matters involved had been debated at considerable length in Committee. That is all very well, but for those of us who did not have the great privilege to be chosen by the Whips to serve on those Standing Committees, it was a very unsatisfactory explanation.

Mr. Garnier: In so far as my hon. Friend's point is a point that I have already made, I agree with it. As for his criticism of the way in which Report stages were dealt with, I agree with that as well. Surely, if the House is to deal with legislation properly, the Report stage is the best time for all of us to have an opportunity to study it.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: It is the only time.

Mr. Garnier: My hon. Friend is Chairman of the Procedure Committee and a man of immense parliamentary experience. I note that he is temporarily perched on the Front Bench. As he says, Report is the only opportunity for the House to study legislation and look at amendments—primarily those tabled by the Government, who have forgotten to include them in the original Bill, yet—

Margaret Beckett: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Garnier: May I finish my sentence first? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield

[Mr. Garnier]

(Sir Nicholas Winterton) listens to everything that we all say. We were given an hour or an hour and a half to deal with great chunks of amendments and new clauses, and I do not know that that is a sensible way in which to go about our business.

I do not want to lose the Secretary of State's friendship. I desperately want to talk about East Midlands airport and know that she shares many of my concerns about it.

Margaret Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman. I do not intend to detain the House with any further interventions on this matter, but I feel that Members ought to be more aware of the history of the Government whom they supported. I sat on the Opposition Benches for 18 years while literally 400 or 600 amendments were pushed into legislation and when I became Leader of the House, I made it my goal to ensure that legislation was ready to be introduced before it came to the House instead of being written as it went through the House. That was a complete culture change.

Mr. Garnier: Let me introduce a culture change for the right hon. Lady. I thought that she campaigned on the slogan "Forward not back". Let us see if we can move forward in the forthcoming Parliament, and try to improve, in a consensual way, the procedures by which we consider legislation. If she plays her part, I will play mine. I will not engage in "Your Government were worse than my Government, your history is worse than my history, your Government's record is worse than my Government's record" tactics.

John Bercow: A model of inclusivity.

Mr. Garnier: Exactly. What more can I offer the right hon. Lady, especially as I now want to talk about Nottingham East Midlands airport—briefly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I know that plenty of other Members wish to speak, some for the first time.

Nottingham East Midlands airport serves the east midlands region which contains my constituency and the right hon. Lady's. It seems to me that the Government need to get a grip on it. It is owned by the Manchester Airport Group, whose shareholders are 10 local authorities in and around the city of Manchester. Her constituents and mine have no purchase on the managing of the company or the consequences of its business activities for them. Her constituency may be a little nearer to the airport than mine, but both are affected by the noise and air pollution that it causes.

As I said in the last Parliament, I am a Conservative and a capitalist. I wish to see businesses thrive, but I wish to see them thrive only as long as they are well behaved towards their neighbours. No trucking company that proposed to drive trucks through my constituency every 90 seconds throughout the night would be allowed to do so without comment from a Minister, and indeed without action by a Minister to control that activity for the benefit of the community. But because this traffic takes place at night and in the sky, it is not susceptible to the control of local planning authorities, and because the airport is not designated under the Civil Aviation Act 1982, it is not susceptible to the control of the Secretary of State for Transport. As the guardian of public policy on the environment, the right hon. Lady must ask the Secretary of State for Transport to wake up, because my constituents and hers cannot sleep at night and will not be able to sleep at night as a consequence of the increased night flights.

From 12 May, the new routes took effect. There is an out-bound route and an in-bound route over my constituency in south and south-east Leicestershire. We were told by Nottingham East Midlands airport and by the Civil Aviation Authority, which gave permission for those new routes, that we should not worry because those flights, both in and out, would be far too high above the land of my constituency for people to notice or to be disturbed by them.

On 17 May, a local resident happened to be in his garden and noticed, during an eight and a half hour period, seven flights, all below 4,000 ft. The CAA says that all those flights should have been above 8,000 or 9,000 ft. What will the Government do to ensure that, if we have been sold a false prospectus, someone should be held to account? What will the right hon. Lady do to ensure that public authorities, be they airports or the CAA, tell the truth? What will she do to encourage an atmosphere in which my constituents can trust those whose acts have consequences for their lives, properties and environment?

I will not labour the point. I have made it before and I shall make it again but perhaps not today. I urge the right hon. Lady to take a careful look at what NEMA, as it is called, is doing, what it proposes to do and whether it respects the rights and interests of her constituents and mine. My view is that it could not care less about them and that its so-called independent consultative committee, whose chairman is paid a salary by the airport, is not the proper monitoring authority to control aircraft pollution and noise.

The civil aviation Bill that is promised in the Queen's Speech will, apparently, allow airports to fine miscreant airlines that abuse the rules and regulations on pollution and noise. Would you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, expect East Midlands airport to fine its customers and thus to discourage them from using the airport? It will take a lot of convincing to persuade me that the civil aviation Bill will have the desired effect of making airlines behave themselves when they do not fly down the requisite routes and ensuring that East Midlands airport behaves as a good neighbour. I hope that the Secretary of State will help me, as I wish to help her, in ensuring that NEMA behaves itself.

4.13 pm

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I add my congratulations to all the new Members who are making their maiden speeches. I wish them every success in this Parliament, working for their constituents.

Falmouth and Camborne is my birthplace. It is my home and it is now the constituency that I have the privilege of representing. While I am looking forward to raising the concerns of my constituents here, some particularly hard taskmasters are already pushing me

for progress. I refer, of course, to my mum, dad and two sisters—I never expected that my toughest constituency surgery would be the Sunday family lunch.

The past half-century has seen some idiosyncratic Cornish voices here. A distinguished predecessor, David Mudd—rather curiously, he was one of the opponents whom I defeated—comes to mind. So too does Candy Atherton, a doughty and courteous opponent. However, Cornwall has produced one genuine political superstar, a strong voice for the county and a man who became a national treasure. I refer, of course, to David Penhaligon, our late, great Liberal Member of Parliament. I was just eight years old when he was tragically killed but, every day that I have campaigned in Cornwall, his name has been mentioned and his spirit evoked. His work, not just for Truro and his constituents but for everyone in Cornwall, earned him admiration, love and respect from people all over the county—actually, all over the country—regardless of their personal political persuasions. Just a few days here has reinforced that respect in which he was held by all parties. Every Member representing any part of Cornwall has had a tough act to follow and a high standard to meet. I shall do my best to look significantly less crumpled than David Penhaligon did but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you may be assured that I will follow his lead, which has been followed by a growing body of Liberal Democrats in Cornwall, to put the needs and demands of my county above everything else.

In preparing this maiden speech I looked back to that of David Penhaligon to see what issues were important to him and to people in Cornwall in 1974. I was shocked at how many of the problems that he raised then remain problems today. Before I was even born, before this Labour Government or the last Conservative Government, Cornwall already suffered from spiralling house prices, low wages and lower-than-average funding for our hospitals, schools and police. Today we can add to the list the fact that we have the highest water bills in the country and, like many other parts, face the increasing burden of the unfair council tax.

In the 31 years since Mr. Penhaligon was elected, successive Governments have hardly recognised, let alone addressed, many of those problems. We have lived too long with the assumption that beautiful beaches, a sunny climate and an extraordinary landscape must mean a wealthy population. The truth is quite to the contrary: we are still the poorest county in the country. Indeed, many problems are getting worse. Since 1998, house prices in my constituency have increased by 144 per cent. While that may be caused by the desirability of many areas as locations for second homes, a recent report by Shelter states that Cornwall is the least affordable place to live in the UK, including London.

In Cornwall, doctors, nurses and teachers are struggling to afford to live where they work. It is even worse for people on local wages. Low and often seasonal incomes put home ownership far beyond the reach of many people who live and work there. Wages remain about 20 per cent. below the national average. Action is desperately needed to build the economic capacity of the county and to develop a stock of skilled, permanent and well-paid jobs.

In Scotland and Wales, there has been detailed investigation into the cost of public service provision in rural areas, whereas in England there has been no such adequate investigation into, or account taken of, how deprivation manifests itself in rural areas. NHS funding illustrates the illogicality of the existing situation. Funding is tied to low local wage rates, which will hit Cornwall's hospitals for years to come. Instead, they should be used as evidence to justify increased investment.

People in Cornwall do not demand more funding for public services than anyone else, but they reasonably deserve levels of funding and support that reflect their needs. The Queen's Speech sadly shows that the Government are still not listening to the concerns of the Cornish people. I am determined that the voice of the people of Falmouth and Camborne will not be ignored in this Parliament.

I do not wish to dwell entirely on problems. Progress has also been made, due in most part to hard work and cross-party consensus from politicians, for whom putting Cornwall first has been their No. 1 goal. Objective 1 status for the county was secured through the hard work of all of Cornwall's MPs, through the efforts of our then MEP, Robin Teverson, and with the support of this Government. Our qualification for objective 1 is long overdue recognition of the fact that Cornwall is the poorest county in England, and I hope that the Government will support the next phase of the programme so that Cornwall's economic growth can continue to build.

The scheme has helped to develop the county's economy through its work with small businesses and its support of important strategic projects, such as the Combined University in Cornwall at Tremough in Penryn. It is an ambitious project, which has finally provided access to higher education in Cornwall. For the first time, young people who could not otherwise afford to go away to university have the opportunity to study at home, although sadly now only if they can afford the tuition and top-up fees. For those achievements I pay tribute to my colleagues as well as my predecessors, Candy Atherton, Seb Coe and David Mudd, for their hard work. I hope that this spirit, working across party and political boundaries to achieve what is best for the constituency and for Cornwall, will continue.

For the first time since 1923, the entire county is represented by Liberal Democrat MPs. That is even more remarkable given that the seat of Falmouth and Camborne, since it was created in 1950, has never previously been represented by a Liberal or Liberal Democrat and was won at this election from third place. This will help provide a united voice for the county, but I want to make something very clear: the ambition of all Cornwall's Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament is to put the interests of the county first. That includes making sure that we work with people of all political persuasions, including locally elected representatives from Labour, the Conservatives, Mebyon Kernow and especially Cornwall's many independent councillors, to make the case for Cornwall. People of all parties and none can make a real contribution to winning the case for a fair deal for Cornwall, and as Liberal Democrats our ambition is to make sure that that voice is heard.

Falmouth and Camborne is also the first seat that David Penhaligon sought to fight, and he was told by the selection committee that at 24 he was far too young. Times have changed since then. My hon. Friend the

[Julia Goldsworthy]

Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) was elected at the age of 24 and, now two years older than he was then, I feel quite old.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know that it is difficult not to be overawed by the responsibility now placed on me by each and every one of my constituents. It is easy to be overawed by this building and by the national political figures whom I see all around me. But, as Mr. Penhaligon said to himself when he was newly elected, and I say to myself now, "Hang on, I got elected as well as they did. Let's get on with it."

4.20 pm

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this House today. I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend—sorry, my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy). I was going to say that Cornwall had maybe discovered another star of the future, but perhaps I have promoted her somewhat too quickly. I congratulate her on her maiden speech and I congratulate other hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today.

I am personally grateful to hon. Members from all parties, but especially to Liberal Democrat Members and to the staff of the House, whose advice and kindness have helped me and other new Members to find our feet. I am proud to say that I am the first Member of Parliament to represent Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey. This is a new constituency, and there are many in Scotland. Three quarters of the constituency was previously within the Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber constituency. I pay tribute to David Stewart, who was the Member of Parliament for that constituency from 1997 and the Labour party candidate at the election.

Mr. Stewart conducted his campaign in the way he conducted himself in this House: he was understated, industrious and gentlemanly. He was a renowned campaigner on many worthy causes, and I would particularly like to highlight his work to tackle global poverty through the Jubilee 2000 movement. I wish him well for the future. Of course, the highlands of Scotland have a long and radical tradition. Hence it has been for many years a stronghold of Liberalism and now Liberal Democracy. Prior to 1997, much of my constituency was represented by that great Highland Liberal Russell Johnston, who continues his service in the other place. Throughout his 33 years representing the area, Russell exemplified the thoughtful and independent-minded approach that is characteristic of the highlands. I was especially grateful to him for spending so much of his time with me during the election campaign. It is striking to think that Russell was a Member of this House for as many years as I have so far spent on this earth. Russell Johnston was to me, as to many others, a political inspiration, but he was not the first Liberal influence on my life. My mother tells me that, when I was three months old, my grandfather was seen rocking me in my pram and saying "Repeat after me: 'I am a member of the Liberal Party.'"

A quarter of my constituency was previously represented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy). Indeed, that is not the only thing that we have in common, for we are both former pupils of Lochaber high school and, as has been remarked upon in the press, share a hair colour that is perhaps more prevalent in the far north of Scotland than anywhere else. I have been very grateful for his help and support locally over the past year as a candidate, as well as for his outstanding leadership of the Liberal Democrat party, which has seen us to our best performance in a general election since the 1920s. Both my right hon. Friend and Lord Russell-Johnston have spoken up loudly for the highlands and for their principles, and if I can live up to their standards in the years to come, I shall be serving my constituents well. Like them, I shall work hard for everybody in my constituency, irrespective of their party preference.

Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey is the longest name of any constituency in the country—indeed, to some it may prove to be something of a tongue-twister. While many Members can speak of the visual attractions of their constituencies, I believe that Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey can rightly be described as one of the most beautiful of all. It is also one of the most diverse, encompassing the fast-growing city of Inverness, the remote splendour of the Cairngorm mountains, the mysteries of Loch Ness and the popular seaside town of Nairn. I have not yet had the pleasure of canvassing the most famous resident of Loch Ness, but I am reliably informed that she is not a Labour supporter. Like the Prime Minister, Nessie was not seen in my constituency during the election campaign, but unlike the Prime Minister, her reputation has grown as a result. Tourism is one of the most important industries in the area and hon. Members on both sides of the House can be assured of a warm highland welcome as and when they choose to visit. Indeed, I hope that the Prime Minister will now take the opportunity to do so.

One of the most important recent developments in Badenoch and Strathspey has been the creation of the Cairngorms national park, and I previously worked for the park authority. Readers of the *National Geographic* Magazine recently voted the highlands one of the top 10 sustainable tourism destinations in the world. Clearly, the need to develop the tourist industry further must be accommodated in such a way that it does not at the same time undermine the natural features that attract the visitors in the first place. We must not kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

As Members on both sides of the House are all too aware—the right hon. Member for Fylde (Michael Jack) eloquently made the point in his speech earlier—threats to our environment are more often international than local. The threat and indeed the current reality of climate change are all too apparent to my constituents, not least because they are highly visible through the fortunes of the Scottish ski industry. The Cairngorm mountain ski area has successfully diversified into a very popular summer attraction, as the amount of time and the snow available for winter sports have fallen as a consequence of global warming. I hope that we might finally see some genuine progress made on that most pressing question when the G8 comes to Scotland in the summer.

I am proud to represent the whole of the city of Inverness, capital of the highlands. Britain's most northerly city is also one of the country's fastest growing. The quality of life, as well as the quality of

employment, have caused the population to rise, especially in the Inverness and Nairn areas. As well as being a service centre for the highlands, with much income from traditional areas such as tourism, Inverness is home to an increasing number of innovative modern industries, particularly in the medical field. The success of LifeScan Scotland, formerly Inverness Medical, which now employs more than 1,200 people, is helping to attract many new businesses to the area.

Inverness's growth and success present challenges, not least the fact that, despite recent progress, with wages at 80 per cent. of the UK average, the highlands and islands is still one of the poorer areas in the United Kingdom. Problems caused by remoteness are as pressing as they were when Russell Johnston raised them in his maiden speech in 1964. Of course, there has been progress, and I pay tribute to the work of many public agencies in the highlands. The fact remains that there is considerable room for improvement in all aspects of the transport network—bus, train, road, and air—in my constituency, despite the substantial progress made under Nicol Stephen, our Liberal Democrat Scottish Executive Minister for Transport.

Effective transport links between the highlands and London are vital for the region's continued growth, so it is a matter of regret that the Government have so far not seen fit to protect vital air routes between Inverness and London with a public service obligation. Considerable further investment is also needed to improve road and rail infrastructure around Inverness and between Inverness and Nairn, particularly by upgrading the A96 and completing the Inverness southern link road.

Perhaps the most pressing problem across the highlands—and, as we have heard in other speeches today, in many areas across the country—is the shortage of affordable housing. The rapid rise in house prices has pushed owning a home beyond the means of many local people. One Conservative Member has already confessed to me that he owns a second home in my constituency. I look forward to meeting him there, but I have to say that demand for second homes has enormously exacerbated the problem of the shortage of affordable housing. We need radical solutions, which will be one of my priorities during this Parliament. Although housing policy in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Parliament, decisions made here can have a significant impact on the problem.

Our rural areas are home to many thousands of people, so services in small communities such as those that I represent must be preserved and enhanced, not undermined or removed, as has been the fate, for example, of too many post offices in recent years.

In his book, "Memory Hold the Door", the author, John Buchan, wrote of the importance of holding public office in words that I believe still hold true today:

> "Here our surface ribaldry covers a sincere respect, and in recent years, when parliamentary government has been overthrown elsewhere, I think we have come to cherish ours more than ever. Public life is regarded as the crown of a career, and to a young man it is the worthiest ambition. Politics is still the greatest and most honourable adventure."

I look forward to the next stage of that adventure and I thank hon. Members for their forbearance of my opening foray today.

4.30 pm

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my first speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander)—I hope that I managed to pronounce those names right—and also the hon. Members for Burnley (Kitty Ussher), for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), for South Swindon (Anne Snelgrove), for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Flello) and for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood), and my hon. Friends the Members for Cambridge (David Howarth) and for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy). I especially congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South as today's was his second maiden speech, his first being as councillor for the Longbridge ward of Birmingham city council, which includes the Rover plant, an office he held until June last year.

I have been told that one of the challenges I face in this speech is not to be controversial and I shall try to manage that. It is not controversial to say that Estelle Morris was well liked, courteous and hard-working. As was said on "Woman's Hour" on Radio 4 on 25 October 2002:

> "Estelle Morris's refreshing candour has provoked tributes from across the political divide."

I fought Estelle Morris in 1992, 1997 and 2001, and now she has been sent to the other place. There is no doubt that she was always very courteous and worked hard on behalf of all the residents of Yardley.

I am not the first person to fight Yardley three times before winning. Archibald Gosling fought it three times in the 1920s, before winning on the fourth occasion. I also wish to pay tribute to David Gilroy Bevan, who sadly died recently. He was educated at King Edward's school, as I was, and was also a Birmingham city councillor. There is a tradition of Birmingham city councillors representing Yardley.

Yardley is part of Birmingham, which is a difficult place to understand for people from outside. An "A to Z" would be one way to learn about it, but there are other mechanisms. People who live outside London first learn about Mayfair and Park lane, through the Monopoly board. So I bought a Birmingham Monopoly set, which I shall place in the Library, and anyone who wishes to learn more about the city can play a game. Park lane and Mayfair are replaced by Hurst street and Victoria square. Victoria square is the location of the Council House, but Hurst street is also important as part of Birmingham's history. The city is based on migration—both immigration and emigration. Most people have heard of Birmingham, Alabama, but there are more than 20 other Birminghams around the world, some of which are very small. They include a New Birmingham in Ireland. Immigration to Birmingham came substantially from Ireland, the new Commonwealth and other areas, but initially it came from Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire, the three counties that make up Birmingham.

In the 1800s, Birmingham was very small and densely populated. Industry developed in Birmingham for several reasons. There was less regulation in the area and also a critical mass of scientific developments. For example, the Lunar Society and others worked together

[John Hemming]

to develop new industries. As a consequence, Birmingham became the city of a thousand trades. Indeed, in Hurst street one can still see the back-to-back properties in which people lived. By our standards today, such properties would not be highly regarded, but they were then seen as being of better quality than other existing properties. The courtyard design led to dense population and was not very sanitary, so people wanted to move away. Although the population of Birmingham in the early 1800s was about a million, living in a very small space, the population doubled every 15 years. In an attempt to improve the quality of life, especially in housing terms, Birmingham expanded to take in neighbouring areas.

In 1912, Yardley came into Birmingham from Worcestershire, along with Handsworth, Small Heath, Kings Norton, Aston and Moseley, from Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire. That is why although a lot of people in Yardley work in manufacturing industry there are not many factories in Yardley itself, apart from in Tyseley and Garretts Green.

That brings me to a point about roundabouts—to refer to the hon. Member for South Swindon who was talking about a Swindon roundabout earlier. At the junction of Garretts Green lane and Sheldon Heath road, there is a roundabout with seven exits and I challenge any Member to find a roundabout with more than that. Of course, the Swindon roundabout may be a strange one, but the Garretts Green roundabout is straightforward.

Like the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), I come from a family of immigrants, but we invaded—as Vikings in the year 600. Everyone knows about King Offa, but he was a descendant of the Danish king, Hemming, as we can see from "Beowulf". Sadly, as a result of the Norman conquest many historical records were destroyed, but in chapter 27 of Beowulf, at around line 1,950, we read:

"Húru þæt on hóh snod. Hemninges maég."

That means that Offa was a descendant of King Hemming of Denmark. So although there are many Hemmings in Warwickshire and Worcestershire, our origin is Danish.

Back in 699, there were of course no railways although there were a few roads. The main boundaries were rivers and the River Cole, in the Yardley constituency, was the boundary between Mercia and Hwicca. Mercia gradually expanded to colonise London. If that situation had been maintained, this place would be in Tamworth and we should have much better parties. In Birmingham, we know how to party. At our VE day celebrations, for instance, there were about 10,000 people. We had a street party and a massive celebration but I believe that in London things were relatively mild.

We celebrate all sorts of things. We celebrate St. George's day, St. Patrick's day—about 100,000 people turn up for that—Christmas, Vaisakhi, various Eids and the international carnival. Birmingham is definitely a city that knows how to party.

To return to the Mercia of several millennia ago, it may surprise Members to learn that there was an early currency union. Offa minted dinars in this country. There is one of those coins in the British Museum; a mixture of Arabic and Latin is written on it. The idea was to have the same currency as Spain so that trade would be easier. There is only one of those coins left.

Mr. Morley: A single currency.

John Hemming: Exactly. A single currency in 800 rather than in 2000.

Members may not be aware of another interesting Anglo-Saxon aspect. Tolkien, who wrote "The Lord of the Rings", was also educated at the King Edward VI school in Birmingham, as was the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), although not at the same time. "The Lord of the Rings" was based on Birmingham locations, which may seem strange to people who have seen the films because they were made in New Zealand. However, the ideas developed in Birmingham.

Yardley has existed as an entity since 699. It was known as Gerlei in the Domesday book, which means a clearing in a forest. It has been a clearly identifiable community for a long time, and although it has been brought within Birmingham, Birmingham is not an homogenous city. As I explained, the city expanded, especially in 1912, to take in several villages around the industrialised centre. The villages of Yardley, Stechford, Hay Mills, Acocks Green and Sheldon are the main ones in the Yardley constituency. They are easily identified because they all have an old church.

Industrial philanthropy is another interesting feature. In the 1800s, companies such as Webster and Horsfall, Latch and Batchelor built houses for their work force, like the Cadburys at the Bournville village trust in the Selly Oak constituency.

That very clear local identity has, sadly, been challenged by the Boundary Commission's proposals to divide up Yardley and Sheldon, which have been together since 1912 in the constituency of Yardley and prior to that in the constituency of East Worcester. Those communities have been there for millennia, yet the Boundary Commission apparently—although there is a report coming out on 28 June—do not think that important.

Among the local issues that worry local residents is the proposal to have a second runway at the airport. We are greatly concerned about that not only because of the local impact but because it is not sustainable to have massive increases in air flight all the time.

Another issue is that of the challenges that face the manufacturing sector. Most of the things that I would like to say about MG Rover are far too controversial for a maiden speech, so they will have to be left for another time. However, I should like to quote from Estelle Morris's maiden speech of 12 May 1992, in which she said of Yardley:

"It relies for employment mainly on manufacturing industry within Birmingham and neighbouring Coventry. The economic prosperity of manufacturing in the west midlands region is the main factor which determines the economic prosperity of my constituents and I hope that in the next few years we will see an upturn in the fortunes of that industry."—[*Official Report*, 12 May 1992; Vol. 207, c. 562.]

In essence, there is agreement across the House that manufacturing is important. I shall return to the contentious issues at a later stage as I cannot raise them now.

Among other local issues is the 99 bus. It may sound relatively trivial, but the closing down of a bus service that takes people to the hospital is not very good in an environment in which one would prefer people to use buses rather than their cars. That is a consequence of the Transport Act 1985, which should have made a change to sector tendering. That still needs to be done. However, we are where we are and the argument will continue.

As for the Queen's Speech, I was a little concerned about the idea of legislating to ensure that hospitals are clean, as one would presume that a mop would do a better job, but it remains an important issue however it is dealt with. In terms of MRSA, we should really consider over-prescription and inappropriate prescription of antibiotics and whether antibiotics are fed to farm animals outside this country, creating a bacteriological resistance to antibiotics that causes great hazards to human beings. If the relevant Bill moves down that route instead of setting simplistic targets on mops, alcohol washes and the like, we have some hope that it will be useful.

On MG Rover, I should raise an issue that fits into the environmental and industrial subject matter. One of the projects that has been going on at Powertrain has been the hybrid engine, which is a combination of a generator and an internal combustion engine. It is a good, useful mechanism for the efficient generation of power, but it still relies on fossil fuels, which remain a problem in themselves. Fusion was mentioned earlier. We already rely to a very great extent on fusion power—the power plant is known colloquially as "the sun" and is fortunately at a very safe distance. I am happy to continue using the power of the sun, which is generally the main source of energy in biodiesel and other sustainable systems. In fact the only source that does not come from the sun is nuclear fission, as opposed to nuclear fusion.

I want to end by paying tribute to the work of my predecessors in the Yardley constituency: Estelle Morris; David Gilroy Bevan; Syd Tierney; Derek Coombs, who also represented Wyre Forest; Ioan Evans, who also represented Aberdare; Leonard Cleaver; Henry Usborne, who also represented Acocks Green; Wesley Perrins; Sir Edward Salt; Archibald Gosling; and Alfred Jephcott.

I am proud to represent my constituents and a seat with which my family has been associated for a very long time, and my party in the House. It is important that we recognise that we are all working, as we see it, in the best interests of those whom we represent. I only ask that over time my record shows that I am at least as hard-working and loyal to Yardley as those who have gone before me.

4.44 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (John Hemming) on a fine and assured maiden speech. Remarkably for my hon. Friend, he managed to avoid controversy, although I suspect that that may not be repeated in future contributions in the Chamber. I congratulate all my other new hon. Friends and new Members from other parties on a series of fine, assured maiden speeches. Never before in the course of one afternoon have I learned so much about the towns, cities and suburbs of our country. Clearly, they are all delightful. I imagine the claims of some might be stronger than others, but we have certainly benefited from some very good maiden speeches this afternoon.

Before I get on to the main points that I want to make, I shall refer to the contribution of the right hon. Member for Fylde (Michael Jack), who spoke about the case for biofuels. The Secretary of State and other Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are, I believe, genuinely committed to trying to find a way forward for biofuels, but in the past week *The Economist* reported on the development of biofuels across the globe and highlighted the extent to which the UK has fallen behind.

Many other countries in Europe, the US and Brazil have gone far further ahead than we have, and there is a great danger that if we do not develop a domestic industry we will suck in imports from elsewhere. I urge the Secretary of State to do everything she can to use her influence to pressurise the Chancellor to take the decisive step. A biofuels obligation is what we need—an obligation to have a mix of biofuels in any fuel sold for road transport. The consultation about it goes on and on; now we must have action. If the Secretary of State could apply pressure for that, the Liberal Democrats would be immensely grateful.

I shall focus my remarks on the aspects of the Queen's Speech relating to the Department of Trade and Industry. The leader in the *Financial Times* yesterday was headed, "What the Queen should have said". It started by stating:

> "My Government will interfere as little as possible with the economy and business".

That seems a good starting point. It neatly encapsulates the Liberal Democrat approach to the role of Government in the management of the economy. It is clearly proper for the Government to have a role in producing carefully thought out regulation to protect workers, the environment and the consumer, but the burden of regulation has gone much further than that, and successive Governments are responsible for it.

The real message is that we must get Whitehall off the backs of business. To that end, it is our view that we should start by scrapping the DTI. It is an anachronism and at its heart there is a fatal conflict of interest. It is both the promoter of industry and its regulator on behalf of the consumer. That conflict cannot be justified or sustained. The two roles should be separated. There should be a Minister with responsibility for business in the Cabinet, and separate from that there should be a Department for consumer affairs.

I shall deal specifically with regulation. Continuing with its alternative Queen's Speech, the *Financial Times* leader went on:

> "The biggest priority will be to reduce the burden of regulation, which has continued to grow in spite of my Government's previous endeavours".

That is absolutely right. In a globalised economy our big challenge is to enable our businesses to compete, particularly in the face of the massive threat from Asia, with the extraordinary growth rates of China, India and other Asian economies. The mindset of successive Governments has been that any problem requires new

[Norman Lamb]

laws to regulate it. Regulation is the first resort, rather than the last, both in the UK and the EU. We legislate too much.

The Queen's Speech includes a commitment to introduce legislation to

"streamline regulatory structures and to make it simpler to remove outdated and unnecessary legislation".

However, as has already been noted, there is an inherent contradiction in the Queen's Speech, as its very heavy legislative programme of 50 Bills will bring in lots more regulation. The risk is that past experience will be repeated—that the rhetoric will be correct, but that the burden in the real world will grow ever greater. It was reassuring to hear the Chancellor acknowledge at this week's CBI dinner that there had been many false starts, but will it be any different this time? That is the big question.

The Government have placed much faith in the concept of the regulatory impact assessment. That is a move in the right direction, but Government guidelines are often not adhered to and, crucially, the process lacks independence. Departments assess their own draft regulations, but that seems rather self-serving, as the tendency is for them to justify what they do. The process needs an element of independence, along the lines of the Dutch model or that of the US Congressional Budget Office, with a person separate from the Department proposing regulations assessing whether they are necessary.

In this country, even when the regulatory impact assessment has been robust and regulation subsequently introduced, there is no process by which that regulation may be revisited so that its impact in practice can be assessed. That is why the concept of the sunset clause is so important. The hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) noted earlier that a former Secretary of State at the DTI recommended the use of sunset clauses, but it is still the case that they are never used. What are the Government's proposals in respect of sunset clauses? I believe that they should be a standard provision in all new regulation.

The Government say that they intend to set targets for slashing regulation—another example of good rhetoric. To achieve that, they intend to establish a new quango called the better regulation executive to enforce the new targets. However, is there not a risk that the executive will be just another bureaucracy watching over the bureaucrats? Will it have any teeth? Could it be used to provide an independent assessment of new regulations proposed by the Government? If it can perform that role, it may be of some value.

I come now to the European perspective. A vast volume of new regulation comes out of the EU, but there are two problems. First, the UK continues to gold-plate EU regulations and, secondly, the EU fails to assess the impact of its directives and regulations. New measures emanating from the Commission contain a form of regulatory impact assessment, but it lacks rigour. The two pages added at the end of a proposed measure amount to no more than waffle, with no real value or substance. The Government should use their presidency of the EU to tackle that problem. The Chancellor has said that economic reform must be a priority for our presidency, and I absolutely support that. However, the problem of over-regulation coming from Europe must be addressed, as must the proliferation of regulation in this country.

Some encouraging signs are emerging from the new Commission. The flow of new regulation has subsided somewhat, and it is worth noting that my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne)—until now a Member of the European Parliament—pioneered the use of sunset clauses in provisions under the financial services action plan. That initiative should be followed in this place, as well as in Europe.

As an employment lawyer, I want to say a little about the working time directive. When I worked in employment law, I made a great deal of money out of advising companies on, and guiding them through, myriad emerging regulations and guidance. Maintaining the UK opt-out will be a big test for the Government. The state should not prevent the citizen from working when they choose to work. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was right earlier today to distinguish between proper protection against exploitation of workers, which current provisions already provide for, and the state preventing a worker who wants to work from doing so. The latter goes beyond what is appropriate.

The impact on families, particularly children, of excessive working hours is a genuine issue, especially when both parents are in work. That is why, despite the understandable concerns of business, I do see a case for an improved deal on maternity leave and maternity pay, and for an extension of the right to request flexible working. If reduced hours, more flexibility in the hours worked or, in the case of certain types of employment, working from home enabled a worker to stay in that job and avoided destroying family life, the business itself might well benefit. On helping employers with the regulatory burden, the Liberal Democrat proposal for an enhanced maternity income guarantee would remove employers' responsibility for administering that income, which would be paid directly by the Government.

I want to finish by mentioning one or two other measures in the Queen's Speech. We certainly support the proposed commission for equality and human rights, but the objective must be to go beyond that and to establish a single equality Act. Doing so would codify and simplify myriad different provisions. There are 30 Acts, 38 statutory instruments, 11 codes of practice and 12 EU directives and recommendations in the field of discrimination—a perfect example of the regulatory chaos that imposes an excessive burden on business and leaves the individual citizen completely confused as to their rights. A single equality Act would itself be a great deregulatory measure. It would simplify the law for business and clarify citizens' rights. I hope that the Government will make a move on this issue and introduce a single equality Act, as well as creating a single commission.

On equal pay, a report this week shows that, according to the Department of Trade and Industry's own figures, there is a continuing huge income gap between men and women. On average, men still receive double the rate of pay received by women. As has already been highlighted today, for the role of Minister for Women to be an unpaid one is perhaps not the best

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signal for the Government to send, given that she is surrounded by men in similar positions who are paid for their work.

We very much support the long-overdue measure on consumer credit; indeed, it was extraordinary that it fell at the last hurdle before the general election. The current law dates back to the 1970s, and since then there has been a revolution in the availability of credit and the range of credit products. In the last Parliament, I was a member of the Treasury Select Committee. It conducted an inquiry into the credit and store card industry, which highlighted the fact that industry practices such as misleading promotions need addressing. It is important that the market acts properly and in the consumer's interest, and in that regard this proposed legislation is long overdue.

We support proposals to reform company law. There should be a debate on reporting responsibilities in respect of environmental and social impacts, and on the case for the introduction of a duty of care on those impacts. We need to debate whether and how that could be done without imposing additional red tape on businesses.

Finally, I want to mention the case for fair trade. A lobby in Parliament yesterday argued the case for fair trade. Given that today's debate focuses on the role of the Department of Trade and Industry as well as that of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, something should be said about that. We need to ensure that the Government and our representatives in the European Union do all that they can to press for a successful conclusion of the Doha round. In our view, we all have a moral duty to break down tariff barriers that prevent the developing world from trading fairly with us. Criticisms have been made of the United States, but in truth Europe is equally culpable. We have a moral duty to deliver fair trade and to do it quickly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Oliver Heald. Sorry, Oliver Letwin.

5.1 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As Oliver Heald or as Oliver Letwin, I am delighted to be in the House. Having listened to some Liberal speeches, I am particularly delighted to be here as a recent potential victim of decapitation. It is nice to feel my head on my shoulders.

I look forward to encounters with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. She is a person of differing political views from my own, but I have long admired her as a politician who speaks her mind and who has a considerable and distinguished record. I look forward to interesting discussions.

This has been an excellent debate. It began with a magisterial survey from my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) of the fundamental problems associated with productivity and the effects of over-government on our economy. Very symmetrically, very beautifully and, I must say, very astonishingly, it ended with an equally splendid speech to much the same effect from the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I sat listening carefully for the moment when I would depart from what he was saying, but I have to say that I agreed, I think, with every word of it. That worries me intensely: it is possible either that my hon. Friend the Member for Havant and I now find ourselves somehow oddly transmuted into Liberals, or it is possible that the Liberals have transmuted themselves into a kind of Conservative party on economics. I hope that it is the latter, but I am delighted to find that there is agreement on the whole Opposition side on the great need for deregulation and a lightening of the burden that the Government place on our economy.

We heard an interesting and important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), who reinforced the observations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Havant about fundamental economic problems. That was matched, at least, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Michael Jack), who was the Chairman of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the last Parliament. He explained the importance of climate change and biofuels, to which I shall return. We had an instructive speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green). It was a powerful and penetrating analysis of the complex debate on the future of electricity supply, to which I shall also refer. He demonstrated yet again the power of his intellect. Finally on the Conservative Benches, apart from the maiden speeches, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) stirred the Secretary of State into a passion and into arguing that the procedures of the House were somehow satisfactory. I have to say that I share my hon. and learned Friend's view that they are not wholly satisfactory. Of course, he did not discuss only that: he also analysed the wide-ranging problems relating to rural areas, another topic to which I shall come in a moment.

I congratulate hon. Members on both sides who made their maiden speeches. On the Labour Benches, the hon. Members for Burnley (Kitty Ussher), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), for South Swindon (Anne Snelgrove) and for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Flello) all made lucid and powerful speeches. I listened with particular interest to the contribution from the hon. Member for Cambridge (David Howarth)—I have been associated with that city for a long time, though I have to admit that I did not know some of the history that he brought out—and to the speeches of the hon. Members for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy); for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander), whose constituency will, I hope, be renamed in due course; and for Birmingham, Yardley (John Hemming), who told us a great deal about features of Birmingham that I did not know.

Most of all, I listened to those splendid new Members my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), who spoke about the risks relating to phone masts and the spiralling cost of regulation, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood), who told us about the effects of regional government on the ability of Bournemouth to fulfil its potential. I could add that that is a problem that stretches not only to West Dorset, but to the rest of the United Kingdom. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friends, and other maiden speakers, on their speeches and look forward, as does the rest of the House, to their future contributions.

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The debate relates not just to trade and industry, but to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Naturally enough, it is to that that I want to turn. It is appropriate that we should have a wide-ranging debate on the activities of that Department, because debates on such matters, as the Liberal spokesman pointed out at the beginning of our proceedings, are relatively rare in Government time, and more so because, while I do not doubt that Ministers intend to do the best by the countryside and the environment, the fact is that the Department, which surveys a scene including some 14,000 bureaucratic posts, has severe problems.

The first problem is that the Department has not established an energy policy that will enable the UK to play its full part in protecting the planet. The second is that it has not achieved a sustainable basis for agriculture and fishing in this country. The third, alas, is that it has not adequately protected rural communities and the countryside. I want to raise those three issues before moving on to the legislation proposed.

Let me start with energy policy. This is a remarkable scene. Between 1990 and 1997, this country made significant progress in reaching the target on the Kyoto basket of greenhouse gases. They reduced in millions of tonnes of carbon equivalent by about 8 per cent. in that period. Incidentally, to prevent Ministers from jumping to their feet, I fully admit that that was largely due to the dash for gas and that the large motive for that was economic rather than environmental. Nevertheless, it had a significant and beneficial effect.

That is mirrored in the fact that, during that period, carbon dioxide emissions themselves reduced by 6.9 per cent., which is a broadly commensurate amount. Since 1997, I fear, the figure and the pattern have been quite different. It is perfectly true that further progress has been made in meeting the Kyoto target. The Kyoto basket gases have declined by a further 5 per cent., broadly, but the picture beneath that is by no means so comforting.

Carbon dioxide emissions have risen by about 3 per cent., and the fact that there has been ostensible progress on the Kyoto basket is accounted for by just three things. First, there has been significant further improvement in farming practice. Methane and nitrous oxide emissions from farming have significantly declined. Secondly, landfill methane has significantly declined. Thirdly, and this is the single largest component, there was a one-off shift, which I mentioned in an intervention earlier, in the production of adipic acid, which led to a significant reduction—some 4 million tonnes equivalent of carbon—in nitrous oxide emissions. That occurred between 1998 and 1999. It is an admirable thing and a great contribution, but it is not replicable. We cannot do it twice. We are no longer producing adipic acid on the old technology. We cannot improve again by the same degree.

We should consider the carbon dioxide pattern and, first in this context, the electricity supply industry, although we must not delude ourselves that it is the only component. It represents, however, roughly 40 per cent. of the problem. All the trends are going the wrong way, alas. Combined heat and power schemes have been declining. There are 64 mothballed plants, one of which I saw during the early stages of the election campaign. Between 2002 and 2004, coal-based production increased, which will produce carbon dioxide problems. Nuclear production is declining and, from 2008, as stations are decommissioned, it will decline further.

The Government, properly and splendidly, have placed great hope in renewables. The Government's energy White Paper of 2003 shows that the proposals would lead to only about 3 per cent. of the 1990 baseline, in terms of carbon dioxide emissions—165 million tonnes of carbon being knocked off by renewables entering the system by 2020.

As someone who has dealt with the electricity industry here and in other countries over the past 25 years, I can say that there is nothing in the patterns of that industry that gives confidence regarding persistent and sustainable reductions in carbon dioxide to the level required to meet the Kyoto targets, still less the appropriate and much tougher regime that the Government have established with their 20 per cent. target.

The 2003 White Paper shows that the Government themselves effectively admit that. The White Paper realistically supposes that almost all—80 per cent.—of the effect generated in meeting targets is to come from energy efficiency, but there is a problem here, too. I do not doubt the intentions of Ministers, particularly in this Department, to achieve things in energy efficiency. Unfortunately, Ministers in this Department do not have many of the levers and have not been successful so far in persuading the rest of Government to pull the relevant levers.

I shall give some examples. First, the energy efficiency scheme is not structured in a way that is likely to produce good results. Why not? Because it gives incentives to the utilities to reduce the use of energy in homes and, alas, the utilities have a strong commercial reason to increase the use of energy in homes. As others cannot play in that market place and are not allowed to receive the credits, it is unlikely that the scheme will be effective.

Secondly, Ministers clearly want a movement, as I do, to increasing efficiency in the use of road transport, particularly of cars. Clearly, there is a method to do that, which is to use vehicle excise duty, on which we have made proposals. However, the incentives for hybrid and high mileage per gallon cars are slight. There is some progress, but it has been slight.

Thirdly, UK emissions trading is a splendid idea that we backed, and which I fully back. I should like to see the scheme allied to an effective EU-wide energy emissions trading system. However, the fact is that neither scheme at the moment incorporates air transport, and that is a pretty large hole because air transport emissions are growing apace, while the Government are locked in a legal battle with the EU over the ETS in any event.

As I survey the scene—coming back to it relatively fresh and trying to be objective, and not in a partisan manner or trying to score points—I see a pattern of Ministers of good will trying to achieve effects but not having found the levers. I see a Government who are gradually moving towards either failing to meet their targets or nearly doing so, and certainly failing to meet their own superimposed targets. That is a sad state of affairs.

On agriculture, I am afraid that the story is not dissimilar. I have been involved in agriculture on behalf of my constituents since a time when there were quite other Agriculture Ministers. I have talked to Ministers, and to farmers and fishermen from my constituency, over the past 10 years. I have seen the same patterns reinforced over and over again. Since 1997, farm output is down by 5 per cent. and farm incomes are down by 14 per cent. in real terms.

The single farm payment is a nightmare. Only yesterday, I found some performance targets that the Secretary of State had published for the Rural Payments Agency. Not much fuss was made about them but if you examined them, Mr. Deputy Speaker—given your constituency, you might want to look at them—you would find that the first item is,

"To commence payments under the Single Payment (SPS) by February 2006 and to process and pay 96 per cent. of valid SPS claims by value by 31 March 2006."

It does not say so but it means, "We the Government have given up on the claim that we will have made the payments by the end of February. Instead, we are setting a target that will allow us to fulfil it if we make a single payment to one farmer by the end of February, as long as 96 per cent. of the remainder are made by the end of March"—a month's slip—"and 4 per cent. at some future, unknown date." That will come as no surprise to farmers because not one farmer in Britain believed that we would get there by February. I fear that I am not convinced that we will fulfil the target of 96 per cent. by the end of March.

The cross-compliance regime is set to be a nightmare. In addition, bovine tuberculosis has been increasing by 20 per cent. a year and there is no serious solution on offer. I know that Ministers are worried about that but I perceive no solution from them despite a letter sent by 350 vets and scientists on 24 February demanding a selective cull.

The over-30-month scheme continues to impose huge costs on the taxpayer and the National Beef Association tells us that it also imposes huge costs on the industry. I know that Ministers would like it to end, but, again, it has not happened. Margins in the liquid milk industry are much greater in the supermarkets than for the processors or the farmers, yet I have been persistently unsuccessful in persuading the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry or the Office of Fair Trading to do anything serious by way of an investigation or improving the code of conduct.

The disposal of carcases remains a terrible problem, which has recently got worse as a result of Government action. Again, I am sure that Ministers want a solution but none is forthcoming. Illegal imports continue apace. We have the spectacle of nine sniffer dogs trying to control all the illegal meat imports at 110 entry points. It is clear that, in addition to failing to find the levers for achieving a sustainable, effective reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, Ministers have failed to support sustainable agriculture.

Let us consider the countryside and rural communities. I am sure that Liberal colleagues and the majority of Labour Members share our desire for the countryside and rural communities to flourish. That element of our society works. Indeed, our villages are models of societies that work. People look out for one another and grow up in ways that do not lead to the sort of behaviour that rightly preoccupies the Prime Minister. Alas, those communities have been neglected.

I shall give only three examples of that. The first is simple but important: village halls. I dare say that, to most Labour Members and those who represent urban seats, village halls do not appear an important matter. A village hall is only a small object; a little space sitting in the middle of a village somewhere. Yet the whole social fabric of villages in the rural areas of our country depends on the village hall. That is the place where people come together for the many voluntary activities, from playgroups to Gilbert and Sullivan, and from art clubs to first responders. That is where they meet and manage to create something that gives meaning to terms such as "community", which are often meaningless and abused.

What is the pattern? Until 1997, many village halls were being reformed and reconstituted through lottery grants. What has happened since 1997? I fear that the Department, which was designed to preside over the protection and enhancement of our rural areas, has not allowed those halls to be funded substantially through the lottery.

I accept that village post offices have been closing for a long time and that the Government inherited the problem. Have they done anything to lessen it? Alas, no. Despite the splendid origins of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who is now in his place, despite the fact that he and I locked horns on the subject some years ago, and that he and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) also locked horns on the matter, rural post offices continue to close in large numbers in my constituency and many others throughout the country. There have been 3,000 closures since 1997, despite rate relief and the so-called promotion of co-location of services.

The worst case of all is that of affordable housing. Many Members from rural constituencies—not only Conservative Members but others who have no axe to grind for the Conservative thesis, including some Liberal Members making their maiden speeches—have said today that the problem of affordable housing in rural areas is now acute. This is a two-edged problem involving high house prices resulting from the pressure of people purchasing holiday homes, second homes and retirement homes, alongside the relatively low-wage economies in rural communities. A solution is required, and I do not deny that Ministers clearly wish to find one—in fact, they have talked about doing so—but no solution is on offer today. Any solution has to involve shared ownership, but that is not forthcoming on a major scale.

All these rural problems—village halls, post offices, affordable housing and a range of others—can be set against a background of specific disadvantage in the grant regime for rural areas. The grant regime has consciously been reoriented to pour money into the cities. There are real problems in our inner cities: I know from my time as shadow Home Secretary just how acute the problems in our most deprived inner-city areas are and just how much needs to be done to re-create a sense of solidarity, community and society in those areas. I do not deny that that need exists, but the fact is that the

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rural areas are now significantly and unfairly disadvantaged by the grant regime. The Department has, in part, presided over that, too.

Are these fundamental problems addressed by the legislation in the Queen's Speech? I fear that they are not. There is nothing in the Queen's Speech on the energy agenda, or on the agricultural agenda. I promise that we will engage constructively with the Government on the animal welfare Bill, and on the common land Bill, which I can tell my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) is not a land grab. We think that it involves a series of technical measures that deserve our support in principle, and we will work with the Government to ensure that they work. We are also glad to see the draft Marine Bill, although it is a pity that it is only a draft Bill and that it does not address the wider issues of the common fisheries policy. Nevertheless, we will engage constructively with the Government on that Bill as well.

Those three Bills will not, however, transform the scene that I have been describing; they do not even aim to do so. The flagship Bill is, of course, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, which will have its Second Reading debate—to which I look forward immensely—on 6 June. I fear that it shows all the signs of being an exercise in shifting the deckchairs on the Titanic. It is apparently a simplification measure. What will be the net effect of this measure?

For those Members who do not follow these matters in great detail, I shall read out the names of the bodies in charge of various aspects of the countryside that we shall be left with as a result of this major simplification. They are: DEFRA; natural England; the commission for rural communities; the Environment Agency; the Forestry Commission; the Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate; the Wildlife Inspectorate; the Rural Payments Agency; the regional development agencies; the Joint Nature Conservation Committee; the national park authority; the Agricultural Wages Boards for England and Wales; the conservation boards for areas of outstanding natural beauty in England; the board of trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens; the British Potato Council; the British Waterways Board; the Consumer Council for Water; Food from Britain; the Gangmasters Licensing Authority; the Horticultural Development Council; the Home-grown Cereals Authority; the Milk Development Council; the Meat and Livestock Commission; the National Forest Company; the national park authority for establishing a national park in England; the Sea Fish Industry Authority; and the Wine Standards Board—*[Interruption.]* No, I have to tell hon. Members that I have never been a director of any of those bodies. Would that I had—I have no doubt that there are good pickings to be had. The fact is that this is not by any account a simple system that is being created.

It is true that we are losing the Hill Farming Advisory Committee, but alas, it is to be replaced by the Uplands Land Management Advisory Panel. And there is more good news: we are going to lose the Food and Drink Committees. But they are already in abeyance—they have not operated for years. I fear that when the new EU rural development regulations come in, with their three axes and their 34 measures under pillar 2 payments, we shall have a monumental mess on our hands. That is the simplification that I fear will arise from the legislation.

Mr. Garnier: Does not the list that my right hon. Friend read out inform us about the way in which the Government operate? There are now more civil servants than soldiers in the Ministry of Defence or policemen in the Home Office. I dare say that there will be more civil servants in DEFRA and its various agencies than there are farmers throughout the United Kingdom and that before very long there will be more civil servants than sheep and cattle on our farms.

Mr. Letwin: I must correct my hon. and learned Friend. We have studied the ratio, and it is not quite as he says. It is only true that there are more officials in DEFRA and its satrapies than there are dairy farms in England. It is not, however, just a matter of the number of people. It is a matter of the number of bodies, of the interlocking structures that they create, and of the forms and the regulation that they produce. It is a matter of the fact that our farmers and rural communities are being driven mad by over-regulation. That is not because Ministers want to over-regulate to such a degree. It is not because Ministers want to create administrative chaos. It is because they have not managed to find a means of slimming down a leviathan.

Let me say something about how we intend to pursue these matters in the coming months. This is a new Parliament. The Government have a new mandate: they have a mandate to rule. It would be absurd if we spent the next few months talking about what we would do four or five years from now, but we want to be constructive. We will present proposals in the spirit of applying constructive pressure on Government in the national interest. Let me describe some of those proposals.

In relation to energy policy, we put pressure on the Government to create more incentives for cleaner cars. We will put pressure on the Government to implement the renewable transport fuels obligation, which our colleagues in the other place installed in the Sustainable Energy Act 2003 and which was originally suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde. We will put pressure on the Government to promote micro-generation, as provided for in the 2003 Act. We will put pressure on the Government to work with house builders on zero emissions developments, which could make a major contribution to energy efficiency. We will put pressure on the Government to open up competition in the energy efficiency commitment, so that the scheme begins to produce the dividends that I believe it could produce.

Most important, my hon. Friend the Member for Havant and I will put pressure on the two Secretaries of State for a full review of the electricity supply industry, taking full account of both the environmental and the economic constraints so that we can try to achieve a national consensus on a way forward that can reconcile our economic requirements with our environmental obligations.

In relation to agriculture and fisheries, we will put pressure on Ministers to simplify the cost compliance regime massively, and we will make specific proposals.

We will put pressure on Ministers to improve the labelling regime, so that consumers in this country can know for the first time where their food comes from, what they are eating, whether it meets the animal welfare standards imposed in Britain, and how far it has travelled. We will put pressure on Ministers to take real steps to improve public purchasing of meat and other commodities so that it does not disadvantage our farmers. We will put pressure on Ministers to come up with a serious solution to the bovine tuberculosis problem, using culling licences under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. We will propose, and put pressure on Ministers to implement, revisions of the fallen stock scheme to solve the fallen stock problem. Most immediately, we will put sustained pressure on Ministers to provide relief under the single farm payment scheme through interim payments in the next few months, based on historic grants, and a set of guarantees that farmers will not be penalised for submitting forms based on faulty data from the Rural Payments Agency.

In relation to rural communities, we will press Ministers for a serious approach to shared ownership. We will press Ministers for a new look at village facilities and at the unfairness of the grant regime to rural areas. Finally, we will put whatever pressure we can on the Government as a whole to devolve power to counties and districts and away from the rural development agencies and other large and unnecessary regional bodies. I hope that, over the coming months, we will be able to persuade the Secretary of State to adopt increasing proportions of that agenda, because we do not want another four years of wasted opportunity.

5.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): I welcome the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) to their new responsibilities. I am sure that there will be many opportunities for us to engage in dialogue in the House. I hope that those dialogues will indeed be constructive and useful.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry set out the context in which we are discussing industry and environment today and highlighted both the record and the aspirations of the Government. He also drew attention to the legislative proposals in the Queen's Speech. The speech by the hon. Member for Havant was, in some ways, witty and it was interesting, but my overwhelming impression was that it mirrored strongly the stance taken during the general election by his party in that it identified some of the problems that face the country without contributing any potential solutions. The closest he came to saying anything concrete was when my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller) challenged him on regional selective assistance. The hon. Gentleman said that that was under review. That is understandable. I noted that the right hon. Member for West Dorset was careful to say that it would be unwise to set policy now for five years' time. I take it that that is an explanation of why there may be some policy gaps. That is fair enough; I understand those pressures.

We have had a most interesting general debate. As a number of hon. Members have said, it has been distinguished not only by the fact that a considerable number of maiden speeches have been made, which totalled 10 I think, but by the fact that the maiden speeches—I say this entirely sincerely and it is not a criticism of returning Members—have been of unusual quality. Hon. Members of every party, on both sides of the House, made maiden speeches that were truly excellent. They were an indication of the quality of our new Members, who will clearly make an immense contribution to our debates.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Kitty Ussher) was the first to make a maiden speech. It is obviously customary to compliment all maiden speeches, but today that has not been at all difficult. I was particularly pleased to see her in her place making her first contribution. I have been fortunate enough to work with her in varying capacities—both in her case and mine—over a number of years, most latterly when she served as a special adviser to the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Both her constituency experience and her other experience made her able to make a good contribution to the debate. Hers was a very good start to the maiden speeches. I particularly welcomed her reference to modern apprenticeships.

As I say, 10 maiden speeches were made in all. One of the distinguishing features of the maiden speeches—I hope that no one will mind if I weave them all together—was the skill that new Members showed in weaving in particular issues while observing the customary courtesies of the House by being not too controversial and not too long, describing their constituencies and being graceful to their predecessors. As all of us know, that is not as easy to do as it sounds.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) touched on his concern about phone masts in his constituency. As he will find before he has been here much longer, that concern is widely shared and expressed in the House. The speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) was not only clear and witty but poetic, which is perhaps not so common. My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Anne Snelgrove) talked of her passion for education. Like a number of hon. Members, the hon. Member for Cambridge (David Howarth) talked about affordable housing. That is a common theme across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Flello) welcomed warmly and effectively the renewal that he has seen in his constituency. That was a feature of the speeches by Labour Members, who identified and welcomed the improvements, not least in levels of employment—almost every one of them mentioned the fall in unemployment. For some curious reason that was not such a common feature in the speeches of new Members from Opposition Benches, but I am sure that the trend will change. In future they will be happy to give credit to the Government where improvements have taken place.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) talked about education funding and the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) welcomed many of the improvements that have taken place in Cornwall. I fully understand that that county has faced many difficulties in the past. She perhaps welcomed the improvements more in terms

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of the contribution made by her colleagues than in terms of where the levers lie. That is understandable. I am sure that she will find her place in future debates.

The hon. Lady was followed by her hon. Friend the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander)—poor man. I have no idea how the House will shorten his constituency name, but I fear he may find that hon. Members will not always find it easy to remember the full glory of his constituency title and I hope that he will not take that amiss. Sometimes one wonders how the Boundary Commission spends its time, but never mind. I say that with particular feeling because in the last boundary changes commissioners came up with the distinctive treatment for my constituency of calling my seat Derby, South and my immediate neighbour's seat South Derbyshire. If they had been a little more inventive, as clearly they have been with the hon. Gentleman's constituency, it might have been easier for people to remember which was which.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (John Hemming) made an interesting and diverse speech. He said that he would not refer to his concerns about Rover because his remarks might be too daring and controversial for a maiden speech. I am sure that we all look forward eagerly to whatever it is he has to say about that in the future.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) is a colleague—I hope he does not mind my saying that even though he is in a different party—for whom I have the greatest respect, not least for his impeccable track record in supporting manufacturing. He said that the job losses that we have now seen in manufacturing would previously have been unthinkable, but I recall a number of job losses, not least in manufacturing, under the Tory Government over many years. I also, however, remember that he was as equally keen to challenge that Government on these issues as he has been to challenge ours. That is reasonable enough.

I disagreed in part with the hon. Gentleman's emphasis on productive jobs. I take his point entirely and he knows that I share his view about the importance of manufacturing as part of our economic base, but I do not share the assumption, which perhaps did not underlie his remarks but which often seems to underlie such remarks in this House, that jobs in the police service or in nursing, for example, are somehow not productive. They are extremely necessary and welcome. I am very conscious of the fact that some measures of productivity are rather artificial and do not create a full picture. I do not think that he would dispute that. He asked me specifically to comment on the issue of Rover. All I can say is that, as my right hon. Friend said in his opening remarks, we are mindful that Sir Brian Nicholson is undertaking a study at present and we do not wish in any way to pre-empt what he might say.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Michael Jack) expressed concern that there was not a reference in the Queen's Speech to the issue of climate change. I appreciate that when our colleagues are making so much noise down in the House of Lords it is not always easy to hear every word that Her Majesty utters. There was indeed a reference, particularly in the context of the G8, to the important issue of climate change. Without making the Queen's Speech inordinately long, it would have been difficult to work in some of the references that he would have liked to the need to influence other member states, whether the United States, China, India or others. I accept that those are key factors.

The right hon. Member for Fylde also said that it would have been desirable to say more in the context of the G8 about biodiversity. In fact, we were lucky recently, at a meeting in Derbyshire of the G8 Environment and Development Ministers, to reach agreement on illegal logging, which we hope will have much effect in the future. I wholly share his concern for the development of biomass and biofuels as an energy source—a concern also expressed by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I remind both of them that we have a taskforce under way under the chairmanship of Sir Ben Gill, which I hope will have some useful contribution to make on these issues.

The hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) also alluded to climate change issues, but he was reluctant to accept that it was possible to address the need for more affordable housing—a concern expressed across the Chamber—without a devastating impact on the environment. We share the concern about housing; we do not accept that it cannot be tackled without damaging environmental impacts.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) was one of many Labour Members who paid tribute to the Government's management of the economy without ignoring the continuing problems and difficulties. I said a moment ago that almost every Labour Member referred to the fall in unemployment in their constituencies, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber). She referred to the opportunities, not least for manufacturing, that occur in her constituency.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) could honestly and honourably be said to have given the Queen's Speech a mixed reception. He did, however, welcome the investment that the Government intend to make and have made in education. I very much welcome that, and I know that he is conscious of how important that is for the future of people in any of our constituencies.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), although graceful to both maiden speakers and retired or defeated colleagues, was perhaps less graceful about the support that the Government are giving to education and health care. I find it astonishing to listen to hon. Members who have been in this place for some considerable time complaining about the inadequacy of this Government's support for services that were starved of money by the Government whom they supported.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough drew attention in particular to the remaining concerns in rural areas, as did the right hon. Member for West Dorset. I simply say to both of them that we are extraordinarily conscious of the real need that remains for improvement in rural areas. I cannot stress too often the issue of affordable housing because it is something that is raised with me by every Labour Member who has a rural or semi-rural constituency. The hon. and learned Member

for Harborough talked in such terms about the problems of his constituents that I thought that he must have missed the survey undertaken by my Department of satisfaction with services in rural areas. That survey showed remarkable levels of approval of services in rural areas among the rural communities.

We have as a Government put in substantial resources—some £150 million a year for rural post offices, £30 million for rural police, and support for new facilities for health care, for small schools and for village shops. I am not arguing that any of this is enough. There is much more undoubtedly to do, but to talk as though there has been no improvement is to ignore not only the record of the previous Government, but the record of change and improvement over which this Government have presided.

Like the right hon. Member for West Dorset, I can reassure the hon. and learned Member for Harborough that it is not the intention of the Government—although my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead may be disappointed to hear this—to nationalise common land or, indeed, any other land. No, I think that I do my hon. Friend an injustice because I am sure that he would not be in favour of taking anything from the people. It is indeed the case that a Bill on common land is needed. It has been called for by nearly every rural organisation, including the Country Land and Business Association, although I do not doubt that, as always, there will be issues about the detail. The Bill is intended to modernise outdated legislation, to provide better local management of common land and to enable commoners and landowners to work together to manage the land, update the register and so forth. It will be a worthwhile measure, which some sceptical Members might even support.

Mr. Garnier *rose—*

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con) *rose—*

Margaret Beckett: I shall give way first to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough.

Mr. Garnier: I do not want to repeat the arguments of a few moments ago, but has the Secretary of State had an opportunity to assist me by providing more information about the Nottingham East Midlands airport?

Margaret Beckett: I was just coming to that, but I had better give way again first.

Mr. Paice: The Secretary of State has rightly said that the Bill will be technical and we will want to engage with it. Will she ensure that the Bill is published a long time before the House debates it, as it is the sort of legislation that will require considerable examination before we can debate it effectively?

Margaret Beckett: I shall certainly do my utmost to achieve that. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was in his place when I had a little dust-up with the hon. and learned Member for Harborough, but it very much part of the Government's approach to legislation that Bills should be ready before they are introduced into the House. It is my hope that the Bill will be able to be scrutinised in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests—*[Interruption.]* The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), has just volunteered to provide a briefing on the subject. I hope that that will be helpful.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough specifically asked me about night flights, the East Midlands airport and whether the civil aviation Bill would help. I am not aware that we are having a debate on transport issues in the Queen's Speech, but I shall certainly draw his and his constituents' concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, who will be sorry to hear about them.

As to the speech of the hon. Member for North Norfolk, I rather share the view of the right hon. Member for West Dorset in that I thought that I was listening to a speech delivered from the Conservative Benches. The hon. Member for North Norfolk may take that as compliment, especially in his seat, but I certainly did not agree with some of his observations—the abolition of the Department for Trade and Industry, for example. I doubt whether the business community would welcome that. Only a few days ago, the deputy director of the CBI said that a Department for wealth creation was the best place to deal with regulation, trade and business issues. Only by handling such issues are we able to deal with problems relating to the growth of red tape that are often raised in the House. I do not believe that the clientele to which the hon. Member for North Norfolk referred would welcome abolition.

Mr. Letwin: I am immensely grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way and for listening rather more carefully than I was to the speech of the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). If he did advocate the abolition of the Department for Trade and Industry, it is important to note that that is not quite the view of Conservative Members. We believe that it should be thinned down rather than abolished.

Margaret Beckett: A policy commitment there, perhaps, and so early in our Parliament. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will be delighted to hear that.

The right hon. Member for West Dorset made many points and I hope that he will forgive me for not dealing with all of them in detail now. As he says, we will have many opportunities for further exchanges. He asked about energy policy, agriculture and rural areas. I have already said most of what I would like to say about rural areas in response to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough.

The right hon. Gentleman reiterated the importance of affordable rural housing and I would make two points in response. First, he spoke about prices and low wages, and it is the present Government who introduced the national minimum wage, which has put a floor on wages in rural communities as elsewhere, and we believe that it has been of assistance. Secondly, I accept that the right hon. Gentleman may not have ploughed through every word of either our general manifesto or the smaller rural manifesto that we produced during the election campaign, but I can tell him that we propose to set up a

[Margaret Beckett]

small and, I hope, speedy advisory commission on rural housing. It should specifically deal with the issues that the right hon. Gentleman and others have raised. We are very conscious of the degree to which that is an issue, not least in rural areas.

The right hon. Gentleman touched also on energy policy, but I take strictures from the Opposition with a pinch of salt, given that they did not even have a target for reduction in CO_2 emissions other than the Kyoto target. However, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have not made as much progress in tackling CO_2 as we had hoped, although in the early years of this Government we did do so. He made a common error—I hope that he does not mind me saying so—in referring to the contribution made by the switch in power sourcing from coal to gas. That makes a diminishing contribution to the reduction in emissions. It is often claimed that most of the changes are accounted for by the switch from coal to gas, but that is no longer the case. Only about 25 per cent. of the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions can now be attributed to that switch.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the energy efficiency commitment and I remind him that that is a legal requirement. I take his point that companies may not be enthusiastic about volunteering for such work, but it is a legal obligation on them—for that very reason. He also mentioned vehicle excise duty and fuel incentives, and he knows that the Government have taken action on those and keep continually under review where and how we should do more, not least on aviation. That issue will be a key feature of our EU presidency. It is such a relief to be able to refer straightforwardly to our EU presidency, instead of adding the caveats, "If we win our seats", or "If we are the Government". It will be a key goal in the Environment Council to seek agreement with our colleagues to introduce aviation into the emissions trading scheme by 2008. That would be an important first step, because although the international community as a whole has long said that we have to tackle the issue, nothing has been done. If we can show that such steps work in Europe, it might provide the entrée for a much wider approach.

The right hon. Gentleman made several points about performance in agriculture. We have been engaged in the pursuit of a sustainable approach to agriculture for some time, and we will continue that. I take his point, to a degree, about the issue of cross-compliance. We would have liked it to be less onerous and less detailed, but—as he will know—such matters are decided on a cross-governmental basis. In his remarks, the right hon. Gentleman rose above the substantial change in the CAP that I negotiated two or three years ago and which will mean, over time, a real revolution and simplification for British farming. I accept, with great regret, that considerable teething problems have occurred in the transition, perhaps inevitably, but I assure him that we are doing everything that we can to overcome those problems.

On the specific issue of interim payments, we are keeping them under review and we have talked to the banks. However, we would not be prepared to make arrangements for interim payments that might jeopardise the delivery of the full payment in the final system. We are not prepared to risk that and we have discussed it with the National Farmers Union, which is mindful of the issues. Those are not easy issues, but I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we keep them under review and will do our best to keep him and his team informed.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State, not only for what she has just said but because she has been in correspondence with me about a constituency company called World Flowers. It has faced a hugely intrusive and expensive inspection regime that is partly the fault of the European Union. However, the implementation of the regime by her Department has made it much more intrusive and expensive than it need be. Will she agree to have a meeting with me and, possibly, my constituents to talk through whether something can be done to alleviate the regime? It is part of the over-regulation that impinges on the company in this country and on the farmers in Kenya who produce the flowers that World Flowers import, and it is doing serious damage to them as well.

Margaret Beckett: I will do what I can. If I can meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituents I shall certainly do so, but if not I will ask one of my ministerial team to do so. I take his point, which is a serious one and is among a number on which we are conscious that there are legitimate concerns about whether we are handling things in too detailed a way that can become oppressive. The balance is always difficult to strike and I am the last person to assert that we always get it right, which is why we are grateful to Members on both sides of the House for bringing such issues to our attention, and why we will always undertake to consider them as carefully as we can.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I have been patiently waiting to see whether the Secretary of State would raise the issue of bovine TB, which is a serious one for those of us who represent constituencies in the west country. Bovine TB is a cause of great economic loss, especially when subsidies are being reduced. Will the Secretary of State have another real look at the issue? Farmers in my constituency believe that her Department is now in possession of sufficient facts from the Krebs reviews to make a real announcement and take proper action on the matter. I shall be writing to ask her if she will meet a delegation of my most informed farmers. I do not expect her to give me an answer about that this afternoon, but will she have a real look at the issue to see whether it can be resolved?

Margaret Beckett: I am extremely conscious of how grave the problem is. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government's top priority is to try to ensure that we keep clean areas clean, as well as dealing with the problem as speedily as we can. We are keeping the issue under review and we look closely at the evidence. I completely understand the concerns and feelings that are expressed, but sometimes—although it may be counter-intuitive—what we are urged to do appears from other evidence to be counter-productive. The hon.

Gentleman will know that one of the reasons we stopped the so-called reactive cull was that early indications from the evidence were that it was making matters worse, so it was a risk that we were not prepared to run.

I am conscious of the time pressures, so in closing the debate I simply want to point out, as I said earlier in response to the right hon. Member for Fylde—a former Chairman of the Select Committee—who, like the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), raised some issues and concerns, that the Government are indeed mindful of the importance of climate change. We are working through our presidency of the G8, as we shall through our presidency of the European Union, to see how much we can do to tackle that issue. We have already held a successful scientific meeting in Exeter, which established that there may be even greater dangers than we thought.

In March, we held an immensely successful meeting of Energy and Environment Ministers from about 20 countries, which may not have impinged as fully on the attention of Members as it might have done had we not been thought to be approaching a general election. There was a real stimulus and exchange of ideas about how to tackle energy supply across the world in future. The choices that are made in coming years, not least in China and India, for example, will have an immense influence on the impact of climate change.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston and others raised the issue of the science base. The hon. Member for Lewes also asked me specifically about clean coal technology and carbon sequestration. Yes, indeed, we are mindful of the importance of the science base and such issues have much to contribute, not least through the climate change review that we are undertaking. Our goal will be to show how we can get back on track to meet our target of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide by 2010.

I want to make one final point. We talk all the time about the problems and costs of climate change, but there are real opportunities too—for business, wealth creation and jobs. Those are opportunities we must seize.

Debate adjourned.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Debate to be resumed on Monday 23 May.

Travellers

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

5.59 pm

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): My constituents in Nottingham, North are fed up and sick and tired of the activities of a small group of antisocial Travellers who have lighted on my constituency on six different sites over the past seven weeks. At Easter, that group broke into Springfield primary school, for the second time in a year, then into a local leisure centre, then on to a local cricket field, and then on to other leisure facilities attached to a local college. This is not about the proper provision of Traveller sites, which I fully support, since an official Traveller site is located only a few hundred yards away from where most of the illegal encampments took place. This particular group of Travellers has no interest whatsoever in locating on the approved site, and equally has no concern for their damage and despoliation, the human and other waste that they left behind, and the inconvenience to and intimidation of local residents that they caused.

There was a far greater impact on the schoolchildren than just their playing field being occupied and out of action, meaning no games lessons. The children were unable to use their playground because it bordered the camp, and the Travellers' dogs kept climbing through the fence, barking and chasing them. The Traveller children shouted abuse or threw things at the pupils when they did try to play outside, and on one occasion fired air rifles close to the fence until the police intervened. That lack of outdoor exercise space has obviously had a great impact not only on the sport curriculum but on the breaks and lunchtime play of those young people. Incidentally, personal antisocial behaviour orders are prohibitively expensive to pursue in such circumstances, where individuals are highly mobile.

There are many other examples of that behaviour, some on other sites, in my constituency over the past two months on which I could elaborate if time permitted. The law needs to be changed to protect my constituents from this extreme antisocial behaviour, and here are 10 suggestions that I should like the Minister to think about and perhaps respond to today. First, provision has been made in the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 for the police to be able to move trespassers off a site when they have no legal right to be there. Unfortunately, that power is available only if the local authority has itself provided a site for Travellers in the area. The power does not acknowledge the existence of private site provision in the local authority area and does not recognise the difficulty that compact and fully developed cities such as Nottingham have in finding land in their area to provide a suitable site. Even if a local authority provided a site just a few yards over its boundary into a neighbouring authority, it would still not be able to use the aforementioned provisions in the 2003 Act. That has been confirmed by the Home Office to staff at Nottingham city council. Nottingham does own some land that may be suitable, but it is in the nearby Ashfield district council area. Those three legal inhibitions need to be amended in the light of our experiences.

[Mr. Graham Allen]

Secondly, I ask the Minister to consider a change to section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. At present, one of the preconditions for the use of that power is that there must be six or more vehicles on the site. I suggest that a reduction in that number should be seriously considered. Splitting a group of 10 vehicles into two nearby groups of five is a common device. Last month, in my constituency, one Traveller caused difficulties at Bulwell lido, and he only had his own caravan on the land.

Thirdly, rather than the occupier having to ask trespassers to leave, the legal onus should be on the group that is trespassing to produce proof from the owner of authority of permission to stay. At Springfield primary school, it took nearly two weeks to move the Travellers on the first occasion. On the most recent occasion, it took six days, and that was supposed to be a rapid eviction as some residents signed statements to say that they recognised people from the previous visit, meaning that the first eviction order could be re-served. If the Travellers were moved off more rapidly, they would not have time to create the waste—for example, the building rubble and the unguarded household appliances—or time to set fire to and leave burned-out caravans on such sites.

Fourthly, land with a clear pre-existing use should be safeguarded. It beggars belief that school grounds and playing fields can suffer such loss. They should be put on a list of prohibited sites safeguarded by criminal trespass legislation, which would enable Travellers to be moved on by the police instantly, without the need to go through expensive and time-consuming court processes or the two or three-day wait for bailiffs to be available to act.

Fifthly, perhaps the Minister's team can examine how criminal damage and criminal trespass provisions can be more easily enforced. In the school example, the school field was secured with padlocked and chained gates. Residents saw the Travellers cut through those to gain entry. Then the Travellers claimed that the gates had been open all the time and were open when they arrived. Sadly, no one would make a formal statement to the police because they had to live in close proximity to those Travellers until the Travellers' eviction, and they feared the consequences. On the second occasion, a policeman saw three people with bolt croppers, but they vanished into the group of caravans and the Travellers denied everything.

The school had to reinforce the gates even further with welded plates on hinges, boxes over the locks and so on. As the work was being completed, the convoy of Travellers, who had just been evicted from the cricket ground round the corner where they had settled again, told the workmen that they would be back and no one would stop them getting on the field again. Perhaps the Minister will re-examine relevant provisions relating to collective responsibility, and look again at the use of the legal device "common purpose" in respect of a group of people who arrive at a site that was secure before they arrived.

Sixthly, eviction orders should apply for a longer period. Once they have been granted, the direction should be not to return to that particular land at any future time. More modestly, a five-year limit could apply, with a clause that does not require a further return to court or 24 hours' notice of eviction, to make it possible for police to evict on receipt of a signed witness statement from a member of the public, which is usually available within hours of Travellers moving on to a site. It took the Springfield head teacher just three phone calls to find someone prepared to provide a statement last time. If the Travellers decided to contest the eviction, the signed statement would surely be sufficient for court evidence.

Mr. Bill Olner (Nuneaton) (Lab): I recognise the scene that my hon. Friend is describing to the Minister. It is all the more galling when there are spaces available on licensed sites but Travellers will not go there. Where there are vacancies on such sites, Travellers should be forced to go there. More importantly, there should be provision to prevent them from leapfrogging from one place to another. I understand my hon. Friend's case and I hope the Minister will respond robustly.

Mr. Allen: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority and, sadly, great experience. I hope the Minister will take my hon. Friend's points on board when he responds today and in future.

My seventh point is that the eviction order should prevent Travellers from resettling within the county boundaries except in an authorised site. In my constituency Travellers were finally moved from one site, only to settle just down the road, so the whole process had to start all over again. That happened not once, but six consecutive times within seven weeks, making clowns of the police, the council and local residents.

Eighthly, compensation for damage needs to be levied. There is currently no deterrent for despoiling sites or leaving waste behind. For example, at Springfield school it required specialist contractors to remove the waste. Even when the site is cleared and cut, it takes time for the field to be washed by the weather of some of what was left behind by the Travellers, which I shall not describe in detail.

When the Travellers left Springfield infants school last September, they were told not to use the field for a month. In April, after the winter weather, the school was just about to begin using the field again when the Travellers returned. Since that time, the youngsters have not been able to go back and use the site. They have been without a playing field for nine months.

Each time such a thing happens, the school budget suffers, as it costs £875 just to clear the field of debris. That amount does not cover any other of the processes, such as cutting, that may be required. Mine is one of the UK's most deprived constituencies, and schools there can ill afford to pay out such sums from their budgets. The head teacher has to choose between providing books and equipment for children struggling to do well at school, and cleaning up after that group of antisocial Travellers.

Last summer, Travellers in my constituency cost local council tax payers about £40,000 in damage and in environmental costs. I have yet to get an estimate for the cost of the court cases, but there is no doubt that it runs into thousands of pounds. Therefore, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider the use of fixed penalty

notices for littering. Where individuals refuse to pay, orders should be attached to their caravans and vehicles. Fixed penalty notices are difficult to administer when people refuse to give their names and permanent addresses, but it should be possible to build up information on the small number of antisocial Travellers through use of their permanent winter bases, as that is where their benefits are sent.

I also hope that the Minister will look at the Police Reform Act 2002, which allows property to be seized. That should be extended, so that police can clamp and seize cars, caravans and land assets if eviction notices are not obeyed, if fines are not paid and if damage caused by antisocial Travellers is not paid for. Of all the issues that anger my constituents, it is the ability of antisocial Travellers to despoil land with impunity and without effective redress that enrages them most. The Government must put a stop to that.

Ninthly, the Department for Constitutional Affairs should issue clear guidance to the courts to ensure that proceedings are much faster. Local delays with the Traveller group to which I have referred meant that local communities had to suffer to an unacceptable extent. Perhaps the DCA can learn from what has subsequently been agreed locally by Nottingham city council and our area courts service. I pay tribute to both organisations, and to the police, in the very difficult circumstances that I have set out. They have agreed that cases involving Travellers will be dealt with the same degree of urgency as domestic violence injunctions, although that remains subject to the judiciary being prepared to add such cases to the list. However, the DCA should ensure that that practice becomes commonplace. Government have a responsibility to devise effective protocols.

It is recommended that local council officers serving notices be accompanied by a police officer to prevent delays. That results from the fact that council officers going about their normal duties have been intimidated by dogs owned by the Travellers.

My tenth and final point is that the current law of trespass—and the word "trespass" merely means "illegally passing through", perhaps only for a minute or two—needs to be updated. I hope that the Minister will look at the concept of "extended trespass". That would mean that a person who stayed on someone else's property for longer than a specific time—say, three hours—would be committing an offence, and therefore liable to penalties and the payment of compensation. Everyone to whom I have spoken has pleaded that the time should be made specific, as should all other prohibitions in this area. Invariably, the legal term "reasonable" becomes a lawyer's playground at the expense of those who have to suffer extended antisocial behaviour.

I hope that the Minister and his new Travellers unit in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will look at my 10-point plan, and give my long-suffering constituents some relief. I invite the unit to visit my constituency so that its members can learn from our recent experiences.

I emphasise that none of the powers that I have suggested would be used against law-abiding Travellers. I hope that the changes will be welcomed by settled communities and by the majority of law-abiding Travellers and their organisations. It is in everyone's interests that effective provision exists to tackle the antisocial minority so that the rest of us—in the settled and Traveller communities alike—can live together.

Finally, on a personal note, may I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box? The club of former Vice-Chamberlains is fairly exclusive, but he is a distinguished member of it. I am delighted by his promotion, which proves that merit is not always a bar to progress in this place.

6.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Jim Fitzpatrick): I begin by thanking my fellow out-of-trade member of the Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household trade union, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), for his very generous remarks, and for bringing this matter to the House's attention. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recognises the very difficult problems that can arise when trying to find suitable accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers, and I acknowledge the considerable disturbance and distress experienced by my hon. Friend's constituents in this case.

We in the ODPM take these issues very seriously. We have been working hard, and will continue to do so, to find solutions to these problems and to alleviate the distress that local people are experiencing. In the last Session, we put in place a framework of powers and resources to allow local authorities to provide the necessary new authorised sites, and to take effective action against unauthorised sites. We now need to make sure that local authorities pick up those powers and use them effectively. The ODPM has established a dedicated Gypsy and Traveller unit to work with local authorities and to support them in that process.

We are also helping in a practical way: with money. Government funding is now being made available for sites. In 2005–06, the Gypsy sites refurbishment grant is available for new sites, as well as for the refurbishment of existing ones. Its aim is to increase the number of authorised pitches available to Gypsies and Travellers, and therefore to reduce the need for unauthorised sites. In addition, mainstream funding via the regional housing pot will also be made available for local authority and registered social landlord sites from 2006–07.

Our aim is to reduce tensions between Gypsies and Travellers and the settled community. But where situations such as those described by my hon. Friend arise, we believe, like him, that firm and prompt action is necessary: firm action to enforce against encampments in inappropriate places; firm action to provide the right sort of authorised sites in appropriate locations; and, when people are unwilling to respect the rights of others, as seems to be the case here, firm action to enforce against antisocial behaviour and environmental damage. Where persistent and repeated offences occur, action must be relentless in upholding the law. As I hope to show, there are powers to achieve this.

My hon. Friend has made a number of suggestions on how the law might be changed, to which I would like to respond. First, he pointed to the difficulty that cities such as Nottingham face in securing action under the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 if there is no local

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

authority-authorised site in the area. It might be helpful if I rehearse the full legal position. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 sets out police powers to deal with unauthorised encampments. Section 61 allows the police to direct trespassers to leave private land if the landowner has taken reasonable steps to ask them to leave, and if there is damage to land, threats or abuse, or more than six vehicles. The 2003 Act added stronger police powers. The new powers can be used if at least two persons are trespassing, if the trespassers have between them at least one vehicle, if the trespassers are present on the land with the common purpose of residing there for any period, and if there is a suitable authorised site to direct them to.

My hon. Friend suggested that the link with alternative provision in the area should be removed so that trespassers can be moved on more quickly, given the difficulty experienced by unitary authorities in particular, which cannot use the antisocial behaviour powers if the alternative site lies outside their boundary. I recognise that there are particular problems in Nottingham, where the city boundary is tightly drawn. Nevertheless, the aim of the power is to encourage local authorities to provide sites. My hon. Friend also suggested that the requirement that six or more vehicles must be present before section 61 can be used should be amended. Section 61 can in fact be used in respect of fewer than six vehicles if the Travellers have caused damage to land or used threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour to the occupier of the land.

My hon. Friend also urged the need for faster action. I agree. Fast action is achievable, but it depends on local agencies working closely together. We would encourage them to put in place local protocols to ensure close co-operation and effective use of the powers. In February 2004, the ODPM and the Home Office issued joint guidance on the management of unauthorised encampments, and it was updated in March to include guidance on the new Anti-social Behaviour Act powers. The guidance recommends that working protocols be put in place between local authorities and the police. In areas where they exist, they have proved very effective.

A further suggestion was that land with a clear pre-existing use should be safeguarded in legislation. Section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 allows the police to remove trespassers from all types of land. My hon. Friend will be pleased to learn that the ODPM and Home Office joint guidance on managing unauthorised encampments gives specific advice on dealing with encampments on school car parks and playing fields. Each encampment location must be considered on its merits against various criteria. The guidance makes it clear that there are locations where encampment will not be acceptable under any circumstances. They include school car parks and playing fields, and recreation and public playing fields.

I have every sympathy in respect of the problems described over enforcement action where there has been vandalism and criminal damage. Issues about identification and securing witness statements apply, of course, to any criminal activity and are not particular to the Gypsy and Traveller community. Again, I think those must be primarily operational matters for the police. The powers exist: it is a question of the police using them effectively. We recognise that fear of reprisals is a key factor in preventing the reporting of crime, and we take intimidation very seriously. Specific witness intimidation offences cover witnesses in both criminal and civil proceedings.

We have a wide-ranging strategy in place to ensure that agencies throughout the criminal justice system provide appropriate support to those witnesses who feel vulnerable or intimidated. For example, professional witnesses can be used where witnesses are too frightened to come forward or where some independent verification is required to resolve complaints of antisocial behaviour. The use of professional witnesses as an alternative method of gathering direct evidence is thought to be particularly useful where victims are too frightened to come forward as witnesses.

My hon. Friend also suggested that an eviction order should apply for a longer period than three months and that eviction orders should prevent Travellers from resettling within county boundaries unless within an authorised site. Given that we are talking about a direction administered by the police, without reference to the court, there is a question of what can be considered as proportionate for the police to administer. We believe that three months achieves an appropriate balance as it is in line with other similar direction powers.

We recognise the problem of "hedge hopping", mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr. Olner), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North, where Travellers who are directed to leave one unauthorised site move a short distance and set up another unauthorised encampment. That is why the new powers in the Anti-social Behaviour Act create an offence of returning to the local authority area as a trespasser, when a direction is given under the new powers.

Local authorities also have strong powers to deal with antisocial behaviour. Antisocial behaviour orders now have a proven track record and can be used against members of the Travelling community, just as they can against others. Changes introduced in the Police Reform Act 2002 mean that ASBOs can extend across wider geographical areas than just local government areas. That tackles the problem of antisocial behaviour by individuals who are likely to move to other areas of the country and continue their antisocial behaviour.

Mr. Olner: Will the Minister give way?

Jim Fitzpatrick: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not. I have several points to respond to and want to try to get my responses on the record.

A number of powers are also available to tackle environmental antisocial behaviour. Fly-tipping is a criminal offence with a maximum penalty of a £20,000 fine and/or imprisonment of up to six months. Prosecutions can be taken by the local authority or the Environment Agency. We have asked the Environment Agency to prosecute vigorously any person found to be illegally disposing of waste. The cost of cleaning up fly-tipped waste can be recovered from those responsible for causing the offence. The Environment Agency has set up an emergency telephone hotline so that members of the public can notify it of fly-tipping and swift action can be taken. The number, incidentally, is 0800 80 70 60.

Powers available to local authorities for dealing with fly-tipping were extended by the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, which gave local authorities powers to stop, search and seize vehicles suspected of being used for fly-tipping and to investigate incidents.

Fixed penalty notices for littering are available and can be used by local authority-authorised personnel under powers in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 or the police under the penalty notice for disorder scheme. Under the local authority-operated scheme, if the person fails to pay within the specified period, the authority can prosecute them. Under the police route, if the recipient fails to pay or request a court hearing within the specified period, a fine of one and a half times the penalty is registered against them. If the fine is not paid then, the relevant court will take enforcement action against the individual as it would for any other fine, which may include deploying bailiffs to seize goods in lieu.

I note the point that my hon. Friend made about serving fixed penalty notices on those who refuse to give their name and address. In those circumstances, the police could arrest individuals under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to obtain their identity. However, we will continue to keep those issues under review, in the light of practical problems that are encountered.

Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 specifically allows the police to seize a vehicle in limited circumstances. There are already powers in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to seize vehicles where trespassers fail to comply with a direction to leave land. It is also a criminal offence to fail to comply with a police direction to leave land.

My hon. Friend asks me to consider the concept of extended trespass. I shall certainly consider it in more detail, but I remind him that the current legislation goes some way to dealing with this as it deals with trespassers who are

"present on the land with the common purpose of residing there."

In summary, I seek to assure my hon. Friend that there are remedies available against some of the problems he has described.

If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I want to link this discussion to another matter. Action against illegal encampments cannot be considered in isolation from provision of authorised sites. Moving encampments around an area is an expensive and frustrating business that achieves little. He has illustrated that very well, but greater provision would help to end it. Our aim is for those who wish to settle to be able to do so lawfully on permanent residential sites. Those who wish to travel should be enabled to do so lawfully on transit sites or stopping places.

Local authorities have the lead role in site provision. The Housing Act 2004 requires local authorities to carry out housing needs assessments for Gypsies and Travellers, as they do for the settled community. They will also need to draw up a Gypsy and Traveller accommodation strategy. These will feed into the regional planning process to enable an assessment to be made at regional level of the totality of need and the appropriate pattern of provision as between one authority and another.

Ultimately, local authorities will have to identify sites suitable for Gypsies and Travellers as part of their local development framework. The opportunity provided through the regional planning process to look across the region should help to counter the concerns of some authorities that they are being left to shoulder the burden on their own.

Mr. Olner: I want to get one point set on the record. If an authority already has an established authorised site, can it move Travellers on to that site?

Jim Fitzpatrick: That is my understanding of the law as it is interpreted, but I will clarify the matter and write to my hon. Friend to ensure that he specifically and clearly understands the legislation.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North for raising his and his constituents' concerns, as that has given me the opportunity to underline the fact that the Government take these matters very seriously. We have a strong package of measures. We will be working with local authorities to ensure that they understand their powers and duties, to encourage site and service provision, to promote the effective use of enforcement powers and to tackle antisocial behaviour.

I understand that my hon. Friend is soon to meet the Minister for Housing and Planning further to discuss these issues. Furthermore, ODPM officials from the Gypsy and Traveller unit will be contacting Nottingham city council to discuss the difficulties that have been raised by my hon. Friend and to offer support in addressing them. Whether they go to Nottingham or Nottingham comes to London is a matter that will, I am sure, be subject to discussion.

I am confident that when local government and central Government work together and are supported by elected politicians at local and national level, we will start to see real changes on the ground, which will benefit Gypsies and Travellers and the settled community alike.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Six o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 23 May 2005

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

Robert John Blizzard, *for* Waveney

Right honourable Peter Bruce Lilley, Hitchen and Harpenden

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Knife Crime

1. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): What plans he has to tackle knife crime. [1]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government published proposals in December 2004 in the light of which we propose to introduce legislation, announced in the Gracious Speech, to raise the minimum age at which a young person can buy knives from 16 to 18; to provide for a power for head teachers and other members of staff to search pupils for knives, and a range of other measures.

Mr. Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. I am sure that he, like every other hon. Member, saw during the election campaign the recognition that crime rates are falling. However, there is serious concern in our communities about violent crime, especially the use of knives, which is deeply worrying. Will my right hon. Friend reassure all communities in this country that he is determined to eliminate knife crime, which impacts so savagely on not only the victims but their families and neighbourhoods?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right. The possession of knives by young people is one of the matters of greatest concern. That is why the measure will introduce the power for head teachers in relation to schools. We are determined to eliminate the abuse of knives and we believe that our proposed legislation will help to do that. I hope that other parties in the House will support us in trying to achieve those aims.

Derek Conway (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Does the Home Secretary have plans to hold any sort of amnesty for handing in knives? That has proved successful in other countries. Could the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in particular be encouraged to hold such an amnesty?

Mr. Clarke: That is often positive. The London borough of Enfield, which comes under the command of the Metropolitan police, has recently held such an amnesty, which was extremely successful. I visited the area and talked to the police officers and others involved. There is a case for it, but it needs to be introduced at the right time and led by the police in relation to the measure that I described.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester) (LD): The Home Secretary knows that the current sentence for carrying a gun in public is seven years, but the maximum sentence for doing the same with a knife is only two years. Given that both are weapons and can kill, will the Home Secretary consider increasing the maximum sentence for carrying a knife as part of his proposals?

Mr. Clarke: I will be pleased to consider proposals to that effect when we debate the Bill that was mentioned in the Gracious Speech and examine specific measures. A knife is not the same as a gun, but the hon. Gentleman is entirely correct to say that we need to compare the two and ascertain whether they should be brought more in line.

Hugh Bayley (City of York) (Lab): Samurai swords are an especially nasty and vicious type of knife, which has unfortunately been used from time to time to commit ghastly crimes. Will the Home Secretary examine how the proposed knife legislation will apply to samurai swords? Is he considering any further restriction on the sale of such awful weapons or of people's ability to possess them?

Mr. Clarke: It is already an offence to market a knife in a way that indicates that it is suitable for combat or is otherwise likely to stimulate violent behaviour. The police also have powers to stop and search for knives and other offensive weapons in certain circumstances. The kind of weapon that my hon. Friend describes is obviously covered by that kind of definition, but we are certainly ready to look at other measures that could help to deal with such offences.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Should not the Home Secretary reflect on the fact that there is already a whole body of legislation on the statute book that deals with the carrying and purchasing of knives? Will he not also bear in mind that every house already has an arsenal of knives, particularly in the kitchen, to which people have recourse? Surely he would do much better to focus on enforcement than on new legislation.

Mr. Clarke: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right about the need to focus on enforcement, but his question illustrates a fundamental divide in the Conservative party—*[Interruption.]* This is a very important point. He has argued consistently, with honour and integrity, against further legislation in areas such as this, saying that such legislation represents an

infringement of civil liberties. We, however, argue that there are certain types of freedom that need to be constrained for the greater freedom of everyone else in society. Some Conservative Members also accept that. There is a big division among the Conservatives on these issues, and I look forward to hearing what the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) has to say on the matter.

Police Officers (Pay and Conditions)

2. **Tony Baldry** (Banbury) (Con): If he will take into account regional variations in the cost of living when considering national terms of pay and conditions for police officers. [2]

The Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Nationality (Mr. Tony McNulty): The terms and conditions of service of police officers recognise variations in the cost of living through a system of regional allowances. We intend to discuss pay with the police negotiating board later this year, and we will give consideration to any proposals for adjusting the present arrangements.

Tony Baldry: Is the Minister aware that the Thames Valley police recruit about 350 new officers each year? Each year, however, in addition to those that it loses through retirement, it is haemorrhaging an average of 112 officers to other forces, mainly the Met, where they can earn up to £6,000 a year more and even get free travel from the Thames valley area up to the Met district. The cost of living in many parts of the Thames valley is considerably higher than in many parts of the Metropolitan police area. Please will the Minister work out a way in which police officers in the Thames valley can get fair pay and a fair cost of living allowance, in recognition of the very high cost of living there? Otherwise, we shall simply continue to haemorrhage experienced officers.

Mr. McNulty: In answer to the hon. Gentleman's first point, we are more than aware that Thames Valley police is now recruiting record levels of police, as are most forces in the country under this Government. That is a point of real celebration. I take his point, however, that the situation has changed. Up to a few years ago, there was significant leakage, particularly to the Met, but that is changing following the introduction of the special protected payments and other retention methods, and the levels of leakage are now at their lowest for some time. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree, however, that we need to keep a watch on the situation all the time.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford) (Con): Does the Minister recall the flight of officers from Essex to the Metropolitan police, particularly in the late 1990s, because of the large discrepancy between the allowances in the two areas? Although there has been some improvement since then, does the Minister have any proposals to increase the allowances for the Essex police so that the gap between the two forces can be minimised?

Mr. McNulty: It is interesting that we have only got to Question 2, yet the hon. Gentleman is already seeking higher levels of public expenditure than those proposed by his party during the election—

Mr. Burns: Answer the question.

Mr. McNulty: The answer to the question is simply that, in the first instance, it is a matter for the negotiating body to deal with these matters. I take the hon. Gentleman's point as seriously as I took that raised by the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry). The balance between the pay and conditions, and the recruitment and retention, in the home counties forces around London and in the Met are kept under constant review. That applies to the Essex force as well as to others.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): Why do we not ensure that, when the Metropolitan police recruits officers who have been trained in the counties around Greater London, it pays a premium to the constabularies in those counties? After all, those constabularies have trained those officers. It could be done on a sliding scale, but there ought to be some penalty or cost to the Metropolitan police when it recruits people whose training has been paid for to some extent by the council tax payers in the counties around Greater London.

Mr. McNulty: If such a serious suggestion were put to the negotiating body, it would be taken very seriously. However, I am not entirely sure whether it would be appropriate to establish an internal market or a sort of football transfer scheme between our forces. Nor am I sure that the flow is simply one way. There are a number of Metropolitan police officers, trained by the Met and paid for by London council tax payers, who spend much of their career outside London.

Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): Why is the Minister being so complacent about retention in the Thames Valley force? Does he not understand that there are huge numbers of police officers moving to the Met for precisely the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) outlined? When is the Minister going to do something about it? The Government have had plenty of time to do so.

Mr. McNulty: I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that he needs to listen. We recognise that this is a serious matter, but Thames Valley police currently has a record strength of 4,160 officers. There is still sleakage out to the Met—*[Interruption.]* I cannot blame anyone else for that—it is not in the brief, but entirely my gobbledegook, for which I apologise. That leakage is nothing like it was two or three years ago. Members should not charge us with complacency when the matter is being dealt with, and should not paint such a picture barely a week into the new Parliament. As I have said to the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues, we keep matters constantly under review. Let us be clear: the Thames Valley force has record numbers of police, and as a Thames Valley MP he should congratulate us on that.

Antisocial Behaviour

3. **Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on antisocial behaviour in Wirral South. [3]

6. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to deal with antisocial crimes. [7]

The Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety (Hazel Blears): Merseyside police recently launched a programme of action to reduce antisocial behaviour, including vehicle nuisance, graffiti, litter, firework nuisance and binge drinking. Officers have committed themselves to realistic response times and providing updates to victims within 24 hours. Not all antisocial behaviour is criminal. However, when matters are serious enough to go to court, we are working hard to improve procedures and the court process. We have appointed 14 specialist antisocial behaviour prosecutors, and have set up more than 100 antisocial behaviour response courts to deliver justice more effectively and ensure a greater level of accountability to the public.

Ben Chapman: May I tell my hon. Friend that antisocial behaviour was the issue raised with me most often on the doorstep during the election campaign? For example, a hairdresser contacted me in dismay about the loss of business caused as a result of marauding youths terrorising customers. A cricket club contacted me in dismay about repeated vandalism and breaking-in to its pavilion. While I welcome greatly the news that the Beer and Pub Association is to tackle the issue of happy hours, and the powers mentioned in the Queen's Speech to curb those establishments selling drink to under-18s, may I ask the Minister what she proposes to do to tackle the issue in the longer term? May I suggest that she needs to take account of a multi-agency approach and of the fact that young people need adequate and appropriate facilities to be provided?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend highlights what Members across the House will have found during the campaign—that such issues are at the top of the agenda. I am absolutely delighted that the British Beer and Pub Association has today started to tackle irresponsible alcohol promotions, which, I believe, fuel a lot of the antisocial behaviour. The reducing violent crime Bill will include proposals to tackle that. I have made it clear to the House on a number of occasions that tackling antisocial behaviour is about not only enforcement but support. It is about rewarding good behaviour and providing diversionary activities for the decent young people in our communities, as well as tackling the minority whose behaviour is completely unacceptable.

Mr. Dismore: I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that antisocial behaviour orders have been an important tool. Can she examine the fact that Conservative-controlled Barnet council has issued only a handful of ASBOS compared with neighbouring Labour-controlled Camden, which has issued dozens? Can she put pressure on Barnet to try to get its act together in that respect? Can she also examine the magistrates courts, which in our area do not seem to be taking breaches of ASBOs sufficiently seriously or imposing sufficiently serious penalties for such breaches? Can she raise that with the Department for Constitutional Affairs?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend is right that in order to secure the confidence of the public, we have to be seen to be using the powers that are now available on the statute book. Certainly, many local authorities, including Camden, have been trailblazers and pioneers in the use of such powers. I urge all local authorities, of whatever political persuasion, to act on behalf of local communities and make sure that they make a difference. With regard to magistrates courts, all magistrates are now having training about how such powers can be used, with guidelines on sentencing for breach of antisocial behaviour orders. I will continue to work closely with the Lord Chancellor and other colleagues on making sure that powers are used and are effective.

Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): The Minister is somewhat complacent on these matters. I agree with the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Ben Chapman), as in my constituency antisocial behaviour was the biggest issue on the doorstep during the election campaign. Does the Minister agree that we really just need more police on the beat, and more police able to deal with such issues? In that way, we will get the confidence back on our streets that is lacking at the moment.

Hazel Blears: I am accused of many things in the House, but complacency is rarely one of them. As Members will know, I am an enthusiastic advocate of using the antisocial behaviour powers, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that we now have record numbers of police officers—140,000—and 6,300 community support officers on our streets, and that we will have 24,000 community support officers over the next few years. I am pleased that the powers are being used more, with 4,000 antisocial behaviour orders and dispersal powers used 400 times across the country. That is making a difference. Tough enforcement and support, rewards and sanctions and rights and responsibilities all make up a very important agenda.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Can the Minister tell us approximately what percentage of antisocial behaviour orders are currently being applied to people with mental illness and disorders such as autism? Does she think that that is an appropriate use of ASBOs?

Hazel Blears: As the hon. Gentleman may know, we have issued guidance on the seeking of ASBOs in relation to young persons. It provides for consultation with the youth offending team or, indeed, with social services departments. If people with particular vulnerabilities or special needs are caught up in antisocial behaviour, all the partners should meet to discuss what action should be taken.

John Denham (Southampton, Itchen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems of using community sentences to deal with antisocial behaviour

is that most members of the public are usually blissfully unaware that people whom they see out and about are serving such sentences? Does she agree that the case for requiring those serving community sentences to wear some type of uniform or identification is that the public credibility of the sentences, and public confidence in them, will increase as a result?

Hazel Blears: Let me make it clear once and for all that I have never suggested the wearing of orange boiler suits—and, Mr. Speaker, you will observe that no one on the Labour Benches is wearing orange today. What I did say, and what I firmly believe, is that local people want to have confidence in community sentences. They want to see that work is being done and that this is a tough option, not a soft option.

There are a number of ways in which we can ensure that that happens. I am particularly attracted to schemes giving local people a say in what kind of community work should be done, and enabling them to have confidence in the work when they see it being done. At the same time, those undertaking the work can gain valuable skills that will stand them in good stead. I genuinely believe, however, that people need to see justice being done if they are to have confidence in the criminal justice system.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Although my constituents, like those of many other Members, were concerned about antisocial behaviour, they did not want more offences to be created. Will the Government resist the temptation simply to create new crimes, and instead ask why so many measures to deal with offences that are already on the statute book never seem to be used? When, for example, was the last time someone was accused of behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace, which strikes me as an all-embracing measure to deal with many offences of this kind? Will the Minister recognise that what people really want are enough police officers on the streets, and a willingness on the part of the Crown Prosecution Service to enforce the measures that already exist? The response should not be simply to create more offences.

Hazel Blears: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that the issue is very important to his constituents, and that they want it to be dealt with swiftly. That is one reason for our introduction of fixed-penalty notices, 88,000 of which have been used to deal with drunkenness and disorderly behaviour. On-the-spot fines bring the situation home to offenders very quickly indeed. Such arrangements are much better than going through all the panoply of a prosecution which may take weeks or months. We are determined to bring about swift action.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of more police officers. We now have 13,000 more police officers than we had in 1997. It is this Government who delivered a record number of police officers, and the Government of the hon. Gentleman's party who reduced the police service by 1,100 officers.

Custodial Facilities (Young People)

4. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North) (Lab): If he will take steps to improve custodial facilities for young people. [4]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Fiona Mactaggart): The Government believe that the juvenile secure estate should provide a safe and constructive environment in which children in custody can be helped to choose a future free of reoffending. The Youth Justice Board's recent consultation paper makes a range of proposals for improving both the infrastructure of the estate and the regime and programmes that we provide for young people. The board will report shortly on the responses that it has received.

Ms Keeble: When examining the regimes in youth training centres, will the Minister examine in particular the high use of restraint in secure training centres run by the private sector, especially in Rainsbrook, where last year a young boy died as a result of restraint techniques?

Fiona Mactaggart: There has been a report into the use of restraint, and there will be a report within the next two weeks to Ministers about the use of restraint in the juvenile estate.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): When does the Minister expect there to be a reduction in the number of young people in secure institutions? When does she expect the amount of effective education to go up and rehabilitation to start to work more effectively?

Fiona Mactaggart: I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that the number of young people in the secure estate is down—it was 3,175 and is currently 2,659. The number of educational qualifications achieved by young people in custody is growing all the time. There has been substantial investment in education. The number of qualifications achieved has increased, with 4,852 people gaining basic skills qualifications, 577 of which were at level 2, which is equivalent to a reasonable GCSE. Therefore, we are making progress on the issues about which the hon. Gentleman is rightly concerned and we will continue to do so.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is my hon. Friend aware that just before the election, the Select Committee on Education and Skills published a thorough report on prison education, during which we took a lot of evidence in prisons, particularly Feltham young offenders institution, which has improved greatly in the past couple of years? There has been much investment in prison education but there is a long way to go. Will she look at our report, study its recommendations and talk to her colleagues in the Department?

Fiona Mactaggart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and his Select Committee for their report. On Friday, I visited Feltham specifically to look at education in that establishment. I talked to young people who were doing vocational and other qualifications. I talked also to

many of the people who taught them. It is essential that we use the experience of detention to try to help young people to be less likely to offend in future. We know that one of the ways to do that is to reduce their chronic experience of educational failure. I am determined to ensure that we do that.

Police (Administrative Burden)

5. **Mr. Eric Forth** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What assessment he has made of the administrative burden for police personnel. [5]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Andy Burnham): Making the best possible use of the record policing resources we have is central to building a more responsive and effective police service. Our drive to cut police bureaucracy has led to the scrapping of 7,700 unnecessary forms, more civilian staffing of backroom posts, and greater use of technology such as video identity parades. Taken together, those and other measures will free up the equivalent of 12,000 officers for the front line by 2008.

Mr. Forth: While congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his appointment and new responsibilities, may I say that I hope that he does not show the same complacency when he answers questions in future? Is he seriously suggesting that he is remotely happy with the constraints that now exist on our excellent police officers, who are trying to do a job on the front line when they are burdened by bureaucracy, paperwork, administration, political correctness and all the other nonsense that this Government have put around their necks?

Andy Burnham: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his generous welcome. Perhaps I can pay him a back-handed compliment by saying that he would not have been my first choice of inquisitor at the Dispatch Box.

The Home Secretary acknowledged last week that there is further to go in cutting unnecessary bureaucracy in the police force, but the right hon. Gentleman must accept that a level of bureaucracy is necessary if we are to have an accountable police force that has the confidence of the public. He and his Conservative colleagues need to bear that in mind.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): May I also welcome my hon. Friend to his position? Far from criticising his Department, may I welcome the initiatives that it has introduced, particularly its innovative use of technology to break down the burden of bureaucracy? How soon will best practice in reducing bureaucracy, particularly the innovative use of technology, be rolled out to all forces throughout the land?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome. He raises an important point. That drive was begun by my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (John Denham) and was carried on by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety. The aim is to increase the amount of time that police spend on the front line from 63 per cent. to 72 per cent. Technology is playing a part in that. Increasingly, we are using video identity parades. Airwave radios have enabled police to carry out their functions much more efficiently. My hon. Friend makes a sensible point. It is crucial that we spread best practice around the 43 police forces.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Will the Minister tell us what plans he has to reduce the extent of bureaucratic and costly inspections of the police force, and of procedures such as best value?

Andy Burnham: The challenge that we must look at is rationalising the inspection process and the institutions that carry it out. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this Front-Bench team is committed to ensuring that that takes place.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How much bureaucracy ensued as a result of that police officer travelling at 159 mph on the motorway?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me an easy question on my first appearance at the Dispatch Box. I know the case to which he refers, and the police force in question took rapid steps to say that that practice was not acceptable. As a result of that case, we now have a more sensible regime in place.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): May I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his new responsibilities? Will he identify any way in which the Government's best value scheme has increased police efficiency, reduced crime, improved detection rates, made our streets safer or improved our civil liberties?

Andy Burnham: The new procurement procedures to which the hon. and learned Gentleman refers have removed many outdated practices. Across the 43 police forces, there is much more sensible use of technology and civilians have been put into backroom posts. Throughout the police services of England and Wales, the best value regime is helping the police to procure in a more sensible way. Over time, it is helping to free up police time spent on the front line, which is important to communities.

Drugs Intervention Programme

7. **Mr. Iain Wright** (Hartlepool) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the progress of the drugs intervention programme. [8]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Paul Goggins): In March 2005, more than 1,900 drug-misusing offenders entered drug treatment through the drugs intervention programme—the highest number since the programme began. This intensive programme is now operating in 97 areas with a history of high levels of drug-related crime. Recorded acquisitive crime, of which drug-related crime is the most significant proportion, fell by 11 per cent. between December 2003 and December 2004.

Mr. Wright: I thank the Minister for that reply. The drugs intervention programme has been a huge success in my constituency, resulting in reduced reoffending rates and drug use, and contributing to a 22 per cent. fall

in overall crime in the past year. But the money for the programme runs out in 2008. What steps will the Minister take to make sure that this valuable scheme continues beyond that date, and that police officers are able to plan beyond it?

Paul Goggins: I pay tribute to the way in which my hon. Friend has campaigned on these issues in his constituency. He is correct to say that crime is down in his area, particularly robberies and theft, which are the crimes most closely associated with drug offending. In March alone, 45 individuals in Hartlepool got into drug treatment through the drugs intervention programme. The funding to which my hon. Friend refers is secure for the spending period within which we are currently operating. Further plans for the spending review will be considered in due course, but a programme that is making such a difference in driving down drug use and its connection with crime will certainly be a strong contender in any future consideration.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The United States Government have managed to reduce drug use among schoolchildren by 17 per cent. in three years. What has happened to drug use among schoolchildren in this country during eight years under this Government?

Paul Goggins: According to the latest schools survey, drug use among schoolchildren is down, which we will all welcome. It is down from 21 per cent. to a regrettable figure of 18 per cent., which Members in all parts of the House will still regard as too high. We have to tackle the supply of drugs and make sure that where drugs are used, the situation is dealt with appropriately. We also need to educate our children and young people about the impact of crime on them and their families, and through programmes such as the "Frank" campaign, straightforward information is given to schoolchildren. This is not an easy issue to deal with, and if the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that it is, he is wrong. However, we are dealing with it.

David Davis: The truth is that drug use has risen by two thirds since 1998; almost a fifth of teenagers are exposed to drugs each year, compared with one in 10 in 1998. That is the true figure. A former Labour Cabinet Minister said recently that cannabis use by young people had rocketed in the last two years and that kids did not believe it to be illegal. Do the Government now accept responsibility for the damage that has been caused to thousands of young people by use of cannabis?

Paul Goggins: My answer to the right hon. Gentleman is to emphasise that cannabis is illegal and can be harmful. When we reclassified cannabis to class C from class B, we wanted to accentuate the campaign against the most damaging drugs such as crack cocaine and heroin. I hope that he will see that the campaign against those drugs is of the highest importance.

On reclassification, in March my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—in view of concerns expressed about the potential connection between use of cannabis and mental illness and emerging, stronger strains of cannabis—referred the matter back to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, which will come forward with recommendations in due course.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is quite right to say that tackling drug abuse is key to tackling crime, but will he go one step further and look at what happens to people after they have been through drug treatment programmes? Is now not the time to look at developing ways of supporting people after treatment by helping them to get jobs and proper housing, because sending them back to the same estates with the same drug dealer around the corner often leads them to go back to drugs and hence back to crime?

Paul Goggins: As always, my hon. Friend makes a telling point. On criminality, it is important that the rehabilitation and recovery programme provides effective support in terms of housing, education, employment and mentoring, all of which will be part of the drug treatment programmes as they are across the criminal justice system.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): May I take the Minister back to his answer on cannabis to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis)? Will he explain to the House how it harms the suppliers of hard drugs to say to the nation's young people that they will get away with a slap on the wrist if they take cannabis but that they must buy cannabis from criminals, which is the ridiculous half-way house to which he has taken the law on cannabis?

Paul Goggins: The hon. Gentleman has misunderstood my point, which was that it was important that the police could focus all their attention on the most dangerous and harmful drugs, such as crack cocaine and heroin. It does not mean that cannabis is not harmful or illegal; it remains illegal. The police can focus their resources and, frankly, the message to young people is credible. If we argue that cannabis is as harmful as crack cocaine or heroin, we will not be credible with the young people whom we are trying to get off drugs.

Identity Theft

8. **Mr. Tom Harris** (Glasgow, South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to combat identity theft. [9]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Andy Burnham): An identity cards scheme, legislation for which was announced in the Queen's Speech, will provide people with a highly secure means of protecting their identity. Prior to the introduction of identity cards we have set up a public-private sector work programme to tackle identity theft and identity fraud. Identity fraud costs the UK economy at least £1.3 billion a year. Measures that have been delivered include a tougher criminal regime for identity fraudsters and a database of lost and stolen passports.

Mr. Harris: May I add my personal congratulations to my hon. Friend on his well-deserved promotion to ministerial office? He will be aware that utilities bills are

often required by banks as proof of a customer's identity. He may not be aware that, via the internet, it is now possible to obtain, for example, a telephone bill in any name at any address within 20 minutes. Does he share my lack of surprise that, during the general election, Labour's commitment to introduce a national identity card met with a huge level of support among voters?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind welcome; ironically, he would have been my first choice of inquisitor from the Dispatch Box at my first Question Time. He is absolutely right to draw attention to the strong public support for the identity card scheme. The latest polls suggest that that support is running at around 80 per cent. I am sure that the experience in his constituency was the same as in mine. Incidentally, that figure includes 72 per cent. of Liberal Democrat supporters. That is due in no small part to the public's growing awareness of identify fraud. The Government have increased measures to tackle identity fraud, such as the penalty for having a false driving licence. However, my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the problem of false utility bills. I hope that the industry, in particular the finance industry, will listen closely to what he said.

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): What progress is being made to share the registry of deaths with the financial services industry? After all, being dead is not something that one normally manages to keep confidential.

Andy Burnham: The identity theft of those who have died is a real issue. I know that the hon. Gentleman raised questions in the last Session of Parliament on that very matter. The fact remains that more and more people are trying to evade the law by using false identities. I put it back to him that his party needs to consider what measures it would put in place to ensure that those practices are stamped out. A secure biometric identity card remains the best means of tackling identity fraud into the future.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): In respect of the question asked by the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh), will my hon. Friend consider bringing the Society of Registration Officers together with representatives of the financial services industry to discuss the problem, because a great deal of identity fraud is perpetrated by people using the names of the deceased?

Andy Burnham: That is a good suggestion and I shall bear it in mind. We are discovering that the people who seek to use false identities are finding ever more inventive means of using them. My hon. Friend is right in what he says, and he has campaigned on the issue. We need to be fleet of foot in ensuring that the identities of people who have died are not used in such a way. I certainly take on board the point he raises and will feed it into the public-private groups, to which I referred, which are looking closely at these issues.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): May I begin by welcoming the Minister to his new post? In the last Parliament, the Government went to great lengths to demonstrate that identity cards would be a serious deterrent to identity theft. I might say that identity theft has suddenly become that much more important to those of us on the Conservative Benches since the election of my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies). However, on top of that, the London School of Economics report on the Government's Identity Cards Bill said:

> "There is . . . a substantial body of evidence to show that the establishment of centralised identity can increase the incidence of identity theft."

In addition, once it becomes clear that the cards will cost three times more than the border police that we are suggesting, that no one will be forced to carry the card, and that they will not be effective for at least five years, what new arguments will the Government deploy to make the scheme that much more compelling?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. As I reflected on his comments, I thought that perhaps the Conservatives have no reason to crow given that they are yet again embarking on an identity crisis of their own.

Early analysis of the scheme that is being developed has indicated that the benefits, including to the public sector in terms of cutting fraud and the improper use of services, and to the private sector in terms of cutting identity fraud, will, when the scheme is fully operational, outweigh its cost. We are confident that it will be of direct benefit to the citizens who play by the rules, who pay their dues and who want to ensure that their identity, and that of their family, is not improperly used by those with dishonest motives.

Non-metropolitan Police Authorities

9. **Peter Luff** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): If he will make a statement on the funding of non-metropolitan police authorities. [11]

The Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety (Hazel Blears): Government funding is chiefly allocated using a funding formula that distributes resources on the basis of relative need. It does not distinguish between shire and metropolitan forces. The funding settlement for 2005–06 provided grants on the basis of need with a minimum increase in general grants of 3.75 per cent. for all police authorities, ranging up to 6.8 per cent.

Peter Luff: In the last Parliament, the Government often sought to take the credit for the 300 extra police officers hired by the West Mercia police authority, which because of the rotten deal the Government give West Mercia were funded entirely out of huge increases in council tax. Then, with predictable hypocrisy, they tried to cap the police authority for raising the money to pay for the police officers. When will the Government give counties such as Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire a fairer share of the available resources to enable them to meet the legitimate demands that the people of those counties have of their police force?

Hazel Blears: I shall tell the hon. Gentleman about the settlement for West Mercia police: this year, they got an increase of 3.75 per cent. He will know that that was £2.5 million more than they would have got if the formula had been applied across the board. Because there was support for those floor forces, that force got an extra £2.5 million. It also got an extra £2.3 million from the rural policing fund, so it was a major beneficiary of that fund. The hon. Gentleman has 262 extra police officers in his area and 82 community support officers. I am delighted that his police authority was able to look sensibly at its budget. No police authorities had their funding capped this year.

A band D council tax payer in the hon. Gentleman's area pays £2.75 a week for policing—an increase of 11p a week. That is excellent value for high quality policing in West Mercia.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Government did make a great effort to assist Cheshire with its funding, but the reality is that the shire counties still have a gap, largely due to the underfunding of their pension schemes in the past. Will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that we may have a smaller number of problems, but they are as real and as devastating to the communities concerned as the problems faced by those who live in larger, urban areas?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend is right. Wherever they live, citizens who experience crime and antisocial behaviour are entitled to good, fast, responsive and accessible policing, and that is exactly what we are putting in place with our neighbourhood policing teams over the next three years, so that local people know their officers and can get a good result.

We are seeking to amend the pension scheme so that the peaks and troughs of pension provision that have happened in the past can be evened out. Police authorities will therefore find it easier to plan for the pension costs of their authorities.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): The Minister will know, just as her right hon. Friend the Home Secretary knows, that Norfolk has not had a good deal from the Home Office. Will she confirm whether the Home Secretary's proposals to get rid of many of the county police forces are largely motivated by a desire to save money rather than to improve efficiency?

Hazel Blears: The hon. Gentleman will know that Norfolk, like every other force in the country, has had some extremely good police settlements in the past few years and that funding for the police generally has gone up by 39 per cent. since 2000, which is 21 per cent. in real terms. There has been good investment in those forces.

I say to Members throughout the House, not just those representing Norfolk, that our examination of police structures aims to ensure that our police forces are fit for purpose and that they can deal with the whole range of pressures on them, including tackling level 2 crime, serious public disorder and terrorism. We want to make sure that our police services have the capacity and capability to provide a good service to the public, and that is certainly not about cutting costs.

Community Support Officers (Leicestershire)

10. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): How many community support officers have been recruited in Leicestershire. [12]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Paul Goggins): On 31 March 2005, Leicestershire constabulary had 104 community support officers.

David Taylor: The arrival of the CSOs in the town centres and estates of North-West Leicestershire has been most welcome. What is the Minister doing to secure the necessary permanent funding for the 43 police authorities to reassure communities about the existence of CSOs in the medium term? Will he introduce high, nationwide standards of training so that the lamentable lapses such as those in the Met, which were revealed by the *Daily Mirror* on 11 May, are addressed as a matter of urgency?

Paul Goggins: I compliment my hon. Friend on being a great advocate for CSOs throughout their development. He and his constituents are now reaping the benefit of that.

This year, the Government will put £1.2 million into supporting CSOs in Leicestershire. We will continue to fund them 100 per cent. in the first year and 75 per cent. in subsequent years. We are making massive investment through the neighbourhood policing fund in precisely the services provided by CSOs.

Training remains a matter for the chief constable, who makes a judgment about how to deploy CSOs. A training packing has been developed by Centrex, the police training and development authority. The article in the *Daily Mirror* was a timely reminder of the need to keep training under review, and we will do that in conjunction with the Association of Chief Police Officers and local forces.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is the situation in Leicestershire like the one in Staffordshire, where CSOs only work between 9 and 5? Is it not the case that they have no powers of arrest? We heard earlier about antisocial behaviour, but is it not the case that most antisocial behaviour is fuelled by alcohol? Does not such behaviour often occur in the evening, especially on Friday and Saturday, when there are no CSOs available? Is not the use of CSOs just policing on the cheap?

Paul Goggins: In the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as in that of my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), CSOs are making a substantial difference. They do not do so on their own: they are part of the police crime fighting force comprising front-line uniformed police officers, CSOs, neighbourhood wardens, specials and so on, all working with community organisations. That is our vision for policing. Where the chief constable decides that it is appropriate, CSOs will have powers to detain individuals for up to half an hour, until the police arrive. However, their main focus is not to enforce—that is for uniformed police officers—but to be a visible presence and to reassure people that crime is decreasing and they are dealing with it.

Prison (Rehabilitative Programmes)

11. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage) (Lab): What research his Department has conducted on the success rates of rehabilitative programmes in prison. [13]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Fiona Mactaggart): Home Office research shows that a lack of basic skills, drug addiction and poor problem solving are significant risk factors for reoffending. We have used that research to inform decisions on investment in prison programmes. Last year, we increased the number of basic skills awards achieved by prisoners by 36 per cent., doubled the number of prisoners completing drug treatment programmes and increased by 13 per cent. the number of independently accredited offending behaviour programmes. We are currently conducting a programme of research to use randomised control trials to evaluate programmes and further improve the success rates of prison programmes.

Barbara Follett: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and I am pleased to hear about the progress that has been made in education and re-education in prisons. However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), I believe that more can be done. In particular, I would like Ministers to examine the way in which contracts are awarded, administered and fulfilled, because I believe that if there was a little more flexibility, especially in the administration of contracts, the success rate would be even higher.

Fiona Mactaggart: Making sure that such programmes work is one of the challenges that will face the new National Offender Management Service. The service will consider the way in which we contract to produce programmes that work for those who are in detention or serving community sentences.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the Minister believe that the rehabilitation of young people at HMP Prescoed will be helped by the Government's decision to start to place sex offenders in the same unit? Does she also believe that it is high time that the Minister responsible for prisons honoured the promise made in writing to me and the people of Usk not to place sex offenders in that unit if they have more than six months to serve of their sentence?

Fiona Mactaggart: That programme is under review. We are determined to ensure that all offenders are kept in a way that is both safe and rehabilitative. That presents a challenge in an overcrowded prison system, but it is a challenge that we are determined to meet.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): To what extent is a prisoner's success in a rehabilitation programme taken into account when decisions are being made on moving that prisoner to another prison? I have come across cases in which someone who has been doing well in a programme—perhaps a drugs treatment programme—is moved to another prison where the same programme is not available, with the result that that person is in serious danger of lapsing.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are trying to ensure that we have comparable, and therefore more transferable, programmes across the prison estate. However, as I said in reply to the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies), the prison estate is overcrowded. As a result, we have to move offenders, one of the consequences of which can be that people are unable to complete behavioural programmes. We want to avoid that wherever possible, but that will continue to be difficult while our prisons remain as overcrowded as they are now.

Drug Use

12. **Bill Wiggin** (Leominster) (Con): If he will make a statement on levels of hard drug use in England and Wales. [14]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Paul Goggins): According to the 2002–03 British crime survey, about 3.3 per cent. of people aged 16 to 59 and 8.2 per cent. of young people aged 16 to 24 had used class A drugs on at least one occasion in the course of the year.

Bill Wiggin: Is it true that only six hard-drug dealers have been given the mandatory minimum sentence since 2000? Is it also the case that of the 10,486 prisoners serving custodial sentences for drug offences, 4,332 have entered drug rehabilitation places instead of the Government target of 7,885? Why are there not more rehab places for these people?

Paul Goggins: I will have to check the figures. I shall be more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman to give him the precise answer that he seeks. If he suggests that the Government are going soft on drugs, he is entirely wrong. It will be a fundamental priority for the Serious Organised Crime Agency to target the trafficking of drugs. For those who are in prison as drug misusers, the development of the prolific and priority offenders programme will see people coming out of prison and linked straight back into treatment, including testing where that is appropriate, so that we ensure that wherever possible people are diverted from crime that feeds their drug habit.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Only one primary care trust has been bold enough to put the treatment of heroin addicts in the hands of general practitioners, copying the models of Australia, Sweden and France. What plans does my hon. Friend have to evaluate the success, both in terms of cost and reducing crime, of what the Bassetlaw PCT has done compared with other PCTs?

Paul Goggins: I intend to fill the promise that I made to my hon. Friend when I had a previous responsibility in the Home Office, which was to visit his PCT to see the difference that he persuasively argued for being made in front-line services. On a more strategic level, we are working closely with the Department of Health to learn what lessons we can to ensure that we break the link between criminality and drug misuse.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Everyone knows that the Government went soft on drugs when they reclassified cannabis, and they should reclassify it back. It is important that prisoners should receive the rehab that they deserve. Will the Minister ensure that our prisons are kept free of drugs so that prisoners are able to get off drugs? Will he ensure that there will be more searches of visitors who go into prisons, and that a message goes out clearly that anyone caught smuggling drugs into a prison will face a custodial sentence?

Paul Goggins: I dealt previously with comments about cannabis. The hon. Gentleman is right to argue that the Prison Service should take as a priority the need to ensure that we minimise the influence of drugs in prisons. That is what the service is doing, using a range of measures. The detoxification and drug treatment programmes in prisons are at a more intensive level than ever before. The key feature is to link the gains that are made while people are in prison with their return to the community so that the change is sustained.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the ways to reduce drug use is to reduce supply? Will he comment on press reports today about heavy criticism of the UK's actions in Afghanistan by the US embassy in Kabul? It is criticising the effectiveness of our campaign to eradicate poppy production in Afghanistan.

Paul Goggins: We are working closely with the Government in Afghanistan and with colleagues across Government, not least with the Foreign Office. As I have said, within the Serious Organised Crime Agency drug trafficking will be the highest order of priority because it is essential that, wherever we can, we cut off the supply of drugs into our country.

Ball-bearing Guns

13. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): If he will undertake a review of the legislation relating to ball-bearing guns; and if he will make a statement. [15]

The Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety (Hazel Blears): Controls are already in place to tackle the misuse of ball-bearing guns, which are more accurately known as airsoft guns and which fire plastic pellets. It is an offence to possess them in a public place without reasonable excuse. We wish to go further and will be introducing tougher laws on the sale and manufacture of all imitation firearms in the proposed violent crime reduction Bill.

Miss McIntosh: I thank the Minister for that answer, but will she explain why the two recent incidents in Thirsk and Easingwold have resulted in no prosecutions? The police are being put in a difficult situation because such guns look like the real thing, so it is only a matter of time before a youth who possesses one and fires it at another youth will be shot dead by an armed response unit.

Hazel Blears: I am not aware of the specific circumstances surrounding the matters that the hon. Lady raises, but I am more than happy to examine them. Clearly, whether or not a prosecution is brought is a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service, but she is right to raise the issue. We are concerned about the increase in the use of imitations, but I am pleased to be able to tell the House that when considering the use of real guns, there has been a 9 per cent. reduction in firearms deaths and a 13 per cent. decrease in the use of handguns. The use of imitations is a real problem, which is why we intend to introduce further measures in the forthcoming violent crime reduction Bill.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): May I add my concerns to those of the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh)? Several cases in my constituency involving BB guns have resulted in serious injuries, largely to children. The current law is not effective and the police seem unable to use it effectively. We need to get across the message that such weapons are not toys and that they should never be given to children, even when those children are supervised. Will the Minister examine the current cases and ensure that legislation is strengthened to protect members of the public effectively?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend is right. She will know that in the recent antisocial behaviour legislation we introduced the offence of having an imitation weapon without reasonable excuse in a public place. We want to examine those provisions again and find out whether we can strengthen them. We also want to consider manufacture, sale and possession and thus examine every stage of the process so that we drive out the use of imitation weapons, which when used can terrify individuals and, as my hon. Friend said, cause injury in some cases.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I regret not having had an advance opportunity to alert you to this matter. I have just been advised that a question that I tabled in good order to the Advocate-General for Scotland is no longer allowed because she no longer sits in this place. There is thus no opportunity to ask any legal question of that Scottish Law Officer. Such questions are being grouped with those on Scotland in an amended order of questions on Tuesday 7 June. We have effectively been deprived of our opportunity to question the Advocate-General for Scotland—the only Law Officer in Parliament to rule on Scottish legal issues. It is totally unacceptable that the slot has been merged with Scottish questions, Constitutional Affairs questions and questions to the Leader of the House. I request a ruling from you on the matter, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Lady is quite right that she did not give me any notice of that point of order. However, I am reliably assured that her questions will be received and answered here on the Floor of the House.—*[Interruption.]* It is perfectly correct that they will not be answered by the Law Officer to whom she refers, but someone else will answer.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I spent last Friday evening with former Rover workers in my constituency. I am sure that you will not be surprised to learn that they are still angry and upset, especially about the activities of the Rover directors, because they believe that the directors' asset stripping led to the demise of the company, which has put their livelihoods and pensions in danger. To that end, they were even more worried to learn that Ministers are proposing to block the publication of their own report into the collapse of MG Rover. You, Mr. Speaker, are the custodian of Back-Bench rights, with which we make the Government answerable. Will you advise me how I can force the Government to publish the report and thus prevent the cover up, because many of my constituents think that it is perfectly right and reasonable for them to know whether the greed of the directors led to the downfall of that once great company?

Mr. Speaker: I try to defend Back Benchers as best I can, as the hon. Lady knows, but I am not here to do the job of Back Benchers—that is up to them. She should table questions, ask for an Adjournment debate and keep probing because that is the way to do things. We are all very saddened that men and women should lose their jobs, especially in the engineering industry, which I came from. She should keep asking questions and put her point to Ministers at all times.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[FOURTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [17 May],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign.

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—*[Mr. Barron.]*

Question again proposed.

Home Affairs and Communities

3.34 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Charles Clarke): It is a pleasure to open the debate on this part of the Gracious Speech. The Speech and this Session of Parliament follow the most unpleasant election campaign in my memory, most of all in respect of the matters for which the Home Office is responsible, particularly violent crime, the criminal justice system, immigration and asylum, all of which are legitimate and proper matters for public debate, including in an election campaign—however, not the kind of irresponsible scare-mongering campaigning that we saw, in which some parties used dishonest statistics intended to demoralise communities—*[Interruption.]*—used inconsistent and economically illiterate promises, put forward impractical and inoperable policies—*[Interruption.]*—used inflammatory language and mobilised undercover sentiment appealing to the dark side of people's lives. *[Interruption.]* I believe that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) bears responsibility for that disgraceful campaign, which I am delighted to say the country rejected. I hope—

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. When you were re-elected recently, you gave an injunction to the House about how debate should be conducted. Will you rule on whether the Home Secretary is in order with your instructions?

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is in order. Had it been otherwise, I would have ruled him out of order.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful, Mr. Speaker. I am delighted, in the Chamber or outside, to debate with Opposition Members, including the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, the specifics of the charges that I make. I believe that the conduct of politics is important, and it should be done in a proper way. That applies in the House, as the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) suggests, and as you, Mr. Speaker, implied. It also applies, in my view, to the conduct of general election campaigns. That is a point that I am entitled to make.

Derek Conway (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, not at the moment.

[Mr. Clarke]

I hope the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden will use the occasion of today's debate to tell the House that he has turned over a new leaf and that he will debate these matters in a proper and effective way, rather than in the manner that was used in the general election campaign.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: There are real issues and genuine concerns across the country on the matters that we are discussing, which need to be addressed. I identify particularly antisocial behaviour and violent crime. I also identify particularly some aspects of the operation of the criminal justice system, including sentencing. I further identify particularly some aspects of the immigration and asylum system.

My determination is that through this Parliament, on the basis of the policies that the Labour party set out in its manifesto and the pledges put forward in the Queen's Speech, the Government will eliminate those genuine grounds for concern and build a society confident in itself, so that never again will any mainstream democratic political party be able to conduct such a dishonourable and disgraceful campaign. What is needed, I argue, is proper, effective policies to deal with each of those concerns, and that is what this Queen's Speech offers.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman used the word "dishonourable". Can he give me an example of one dishonourable incident in the election campaign that applies to me?

Mr. Clarke: Let me give one or two examples. The first example is posters in every community in the country, which were based on entirely false statistics on violent crime, which were condemned by the Association of Chief Police Officers, and which gave rise to demoralisation in communities throughout the country. The second example is a direct mail letter that went out to households throughout the country, based on totally dishonest arithmetic about local government spending on immigration and asylum. "Dishonourable" is the word I use for those things, and indeed they were. Such a situation is not acceptable in a democratic society.

David Davis: Can the Home Secretary answer the question that he could not answer on "Newsnight" about four weeks ago, when I said to him that the asylum system has cost £3 billion? Wherever it came from, it was the taxpayer who paid it.

Mr. Clarke: First, the figure is not right. Secondly, that is not what the letter said—which was, in terms, that local authorities were being required to reduce their spending on council tax services as a result of this expenditure. That is completely false.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Can there be anything more dishonourable than going around calling for respect and calling the Prime Minister of the country a liar? Is there anything more dishonourable than that?

Mr. Clarke: I agree. My hon. Friend makes a fair charge.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): If my right hon. Friend's grandfather had been an illegal immigrant, and if my right hon. Friend's father had forged his naturalisation application, would he not have been a little sensitive about approaching the issue of immigration?

Mr. Clarke: My right hon. Friend, with his usual accuracy, puts his finger on the issue. As the Conservative party said, it is not wrong to discuss immigration and asylum. It is not racist to discuss immigration and asylum. What is wrong is to put forward policies that simply do not stack up in any circumstance whatever, and to have no sensitivity whatever either to the history, in the way that my right hon. Friend describes, or to the current reality of many of these communities.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): The Home Secretary has said that it was wholly false for my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) to suggest that councils were owed money and as a result were having to curb other spending. As he knows, Kent was pursuing his Department for £14 million right up to the election and it had to impose an increase in its council tax as a result. Now, finally, after the election, the Government have just written to me this morning to say that £10 million of that sum will be paid. That was a legitimate subject for debate.

Mr. Clarke: Not in a direct mail letter in the way that it was done. Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, the leader of Kent county council, the hon. Gentleman's county, will, I think, confirm to him directly if he asks the question that he knew the position contained in that letter right at the beginning of the election campaign, because we sought to deal with it because there were real issues. The direct mail letter sought to mislead, and that was an absolutely key point.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester) (LD): The Home Secretary is right to complain about some of the language used on asylum and immigration, but is he not also in part to blame, because this Labour Government have upped the ante on these issues by taking away the right to appeal for failed asylum seekers, by taking away the benefits of asylum seekers, and by not allowing asylum seekers to work? They have also used language that created the climate that the Conservatives used during the election campaign.

Mr. Clarke: I totally reject that charge. We had this debate during the election campaign. I do agree, as I was at pains to point out, that there are issues, which the measures in the Queen's Speech address and to which I shall come in one second, but I do not accept, as some

argued, that there was some kind of bidding war between the Labour party and others on these questions. I do not accept that.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will agree that there is nothing wrong in debating immigration and asylum in the context of a general election campaign, but he will be aware, as I am, that there are constituencies in this country where the British National party came close to knocking the Opposition into third place, and it must be a very serious matter when ordinary working people feel that there is something legitimate about a fascist party agenda. Do we not all have a responsibility to take good care of our language and not to give legitimacy to the political platform of a fascist party?

Mr. Clarke: Well, surprisingly perhaps, I agree with every word that my hon. Friend has just said. My hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham (Jon Cruddas) wrote an excellent piece this week, which I saw in the papers, on just that question. The way to undermine the appeal of the people whom my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) describes is to put in motion policies that ensure that the underlying concerns about antisocial behaviour, immigration and asylum, and sentencing in criminal justice, are accepted by the British people in a positive way. With that, I want to deal with what the Queen's Speech has to offer in precisely those particular regards.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): There was a fourth issue that people were very concerned about and which the right hon. Gentleman has not referred to, and that was the question of gerrymandering the postal voting system. Could the right hon. Gentleman explain why the Lord Chancellor and his right hon. Friends have not accepted the recommendations of the Electoral Commission on prevention of gerrymandering the postal voting system?

Mr. Clarke: On consideration, the hon. Gentleman might want to withdraw the word "gerrymandering", which did not happen. The Electoral Commission issued serious proposals on how postal voting should best be conducted, and all the main parties agreed on their implementation. We are currently examining a set of issues that arose subsequently and we will decide the best kind of legislation to introduce, but none of the issues concerns gerrymandering.

My Department and I want to address three main pillars of activity through legislation in this House—first, police, counter-terrorism and active communities; secondly, offender management and the reform of the criminal justice system; and thirdly, immigration and asylum and identity cards. The first pillar—police, counter-terrorism and active communities—involves four proposed pieces of legislation dealing with charities, racial and religious hatred, counter-terrorism and violent crime.

On charities, we are reintroducing the Bill that fell when the House was dissolved. It will modernise and reform charity law and enable charities to administer themselves more efficiently and to be more effective. I do not know whether the Bill will receive all-party support, but I know that the charity world is delighted by the legislation and that it found it difficult to understand why some parties blocked the legislation in the previous Parliament.

During the wash-up at the end of the previous Parliament, we could not obtain agreement to the second piece of legislation, which is an attempt to outlaw incitement to religious hatred by amending the current offence of incitement to racial hatred. The legislation will close the loophole whereby Jews and Sikhs are covered by the racial hatred offence, but other faith groups are not. It will curb the activities of extremist groups, which could incite hatred against members of minority faiths, and it will protect those who are subject to incited hatred on the basis of religion. I know that the measure is controversial—hon. Members on both sides of the House are worried about some aspects of the legislation, so it will be fully debated—but I strongly believe that it is important to put all faith groups on a similar footing and to deal with the incitement of hatred. The Bill is about stopping incitement to hatred, which is what we shall do, and I hope that all parties give it full consideration.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Home Secretary explain why sects of devil worshippers should be put on a footing where they would be protected if somebody were to express the view that devil worshippers' opinions are hateful and that devil worshippers should be shunned?

Mr. Clarke: The question concerns incitement to hatred, not the expression of opinion. That development in our legislation is important, necessary and desirable.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): If the Home Secretary is keen to ensure no limit on free speech in respect of criticising or ridiculing religion and wants all religions to be treated equally, will he reconsider his position on the repeal of the blasphemy law? He should at least allow Government Members a free vote on the matter, which would go some way to reassuring those of us who feel that the Government's agenda might advertently or inadvertently cause restrictions on free speech in respect of criticising religion.

Mr. Clarke: That is a serious question, and I want to respond to it seriously. I have discussed the blasphemy law with a number of individuals, including representatives from various faiths, and have concluded—I think correctly—that any reform in that area must begin on a considered basis across faiths. However, I am ready to discuss the matter with all faiths and to examine how we might make progress.

The third pillar is the counter-terrorism Bill, which simply fulfils a commitment given in this House at the end of the previous Session to clarify and strengthen existing legislation and, where necessary, to introduce new offences to improve the prospects of prosecuting suspected terrorists. You presided over our impassioned debates on that subject, Mr. Speaker, and you will recall that I made a commitment to the House to examine more effective ways of prosecuting terrorists, and introducing new offences is one of the ways to do so.

[Mr. Clarke]

I also confirm that the timetable that I set out at the close of the past Session on reports and further amendments will be adhered to.

John Denham (Southampton, Itchen) (Lab): In drawing up the new legislation, will my right hon. Friend look very carefully at the recommendation that the Select Committee on Home Affairs published just before the House rose for the election, in which we stress the importance of fully involving the Muslim community in the construction of new anti-terrorism legislation? It is essential that that legislation does not appear to be "done to" the Muslim community, but is produced in full consultation with it.

Mr. Clarke: My right hon. Friend and his Select Committee are entirely correct and I can give him that assurance. Throughout the debate before, during and after the election campaign, I have been at very great pains to draw a distinction between things that affect the Muslim community on the one hand, and terrorism on the other. That is a false bringing together that I hope that discussion during the passage of this legislation will address in a way that finds approval with my right hon. Friend's Committee.

The final pillar of our activity relates to violent crime reduction. We touched on that in questions just a moment ago when we talked about legislation on knives. However, we also wish to have tougher laws on replica firearms, restrictions on the sale of primers and specialist equipment for making ammunitions, tighter laws on airguns, powers to require certain pubs and clubs to search for guns and knives on entry, powers for the police to impose 24-hour bans on pubs and clubs persistently selling alcohol to under-18s, and the establishment of alcohol disorder zones. The purpose of those steps is to arrive at the situation whereby we can deal with people's real concerns about the antisocial behaviour and violent crime that exists in many communities and take active steps to deal with it.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Home Secretary consider the case of Tania Moore, who was murdered in my constituency by somebody who had been stalking her for more than a year and shot her at point-blank range, having already been the prime suspect in a robbery against her? Her mother believes that that person should not have been allowed to keep the gun. Will the Home Secretary also consider very carefully the investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Commission into whether the investigation into the initial circumstances was carried out fairly? Can he reassure the mother of the victim that the sentence on the person who was convicted by the Crown court just over a week ago, and who the judge said should spend at least 30 years in jail, will not be reduced in any way?

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving prior notice that he intended to raise this particular case. I agree with much of his language and concerns. There are many issues involved. As he will know, the Derbyshire constabulary felt that the standard of its officers' investigation into the robbery was below the standard expected, which is why a year or so ago it referred the matter to the IPCC.The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in summing up the judge stated that the failure to bring anyone to justice for the robbery in 2003, despite the apparent tip-offs, is a matter of serious concern. He will also know—he referred to it in his question—that as a result of the issues raised in connection with the alleged tip-offs Staffordshire police undertook an investigation that is currently under review by the IPCC. I will study such cases most closely to ensure that we learn the necessary lessons so that terrible circumstances such as those that he describes are not repeated.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): Will the legislation include powers to deal with binge drinking, and will it then be possible for local authorities to work with the police to get control of pubs and clubs that open too late and cause such problems in many of our town centres?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely right. She has put her finger on the key question, which is the relationship between the police, the local authority and pubs and clubs in working together. I was absolutely delighted by today's statement by pub and club organisations that they are really going to try to crack down on the happy hour approach. That follows conversations that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety and others have been having with the industry, which must acknowledge that it has to bear responsibility for attacking these problems—it is not simply a matter of going through the law.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): In February, two of my constituents who worked at the Black Bull pub in Fulwood were attacked by three youths who entered the pub and held knives to their throats. Fortunately, no one was injured other than by what I would call a terrorist attack and the stress involved with it. The Home Secretary mentioned sentencing earlier. I understand that it is three times more likely for a fatality to occur through stabbing than through the use of a gun. Therefore, could he ensure that the sentencing for carrying knives with intent to use them in that way will be steeper and stiffer?

Mr. Clarke: I made a commitment to consider sentencing in response to a question from the Liberal Democrat spokesman, and I confirm that again.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The Home Secretary will be aware that there are prolific opportunities to obtain knives and replica firearms through internet purchase. I understand how difficult it is to do something to restrict that supply, but is that something on which his Department will bring forward proposals as part of the proposed legislation?

Mr. Clarke: It is. We are working with other Governments throughout the world on ways to restrict some of the means by which the internet operates and bypasses individual jurisdiction, which addresses precisely the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South) (Con): At the end of the last Parliament, the Home Secretary said that he

was consulting on whether those who benefit from binge drinking—the vertical retail outlets—should make a financial contribution to the cost of policing. When does he expect to conclude that consultation and will he set a timetable?

Mr. Clarke: We will conclude the consultation very soon, and the Bill that we will publish—the violent crime reduction Bill, to which I referred earlier—will include measures to deal with binge drinking. Consultation has taken place and there has been a lot of responses, including from the industry itself, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and we will publish the full account of that when we discuss the Bill.

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the majority of so-called Yardie shootings in London are perpetrated with activated replica weapons. Given that there has been a 60 per cent. rise in the use of replica firearms, why can we not have a complete ban on replica weapons?

Mr. Clarke: I am very sympathetic to that point; indeed, we have discussed it at great length—when I was the Minister with responsibility for the police I raised precisely that question. I hope that my hon. Friend will find that the Bill goes a long way towards what she is seeking.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that many of the problems that he has raised in this part of his speech, such as antisocial behaviour and various types of violent crime, are most closely associated with what one might call dysfunctional communities? After a general election in which one in three people did not vote—that figure must have been higher in those dysfunctional communities—does he agree that the secret to tackling many of the problems in the longer term is to get those communities to function better? That, while not necessarily requiring legislation, could be a means to an end for many of the aims that he has described.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right, and that is one reason why, at an organisational level, we have brought together the active communities area of the Home Office with the section dealing with policing and community safety to promote the positive side of being a community leader in a variety of different ways.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I want to make progress now.

The second tranche of legislation to which I want to refer is that dealing with offender management and reform of the criminal justice system. Three measures will be laid before the House dealing respectively with fraud, corporate manslaughter and management of offenders and sentencing.

The purpose of the fraud Bill is to create a general offence of fraud that can be committed in three ways: by false representation, by failing to disclose information and by abuse of position. The Bill will make new offences of obtaining services dishonestly and possessing equipment to commit fraud. The aim is to encompass all forms of fraudulent conduct with a law flexible enough to deal with developing technology. The Bill will extend the existing offence of fraudulent trading to non-corporate traders, and I hope that it will tighten our defences against the criminal.

The second measure in this tranche is the corporate manslaughter Bill. We published it in draft form at the end of the fourth Session of the previous Parliament, and its intention is to create a new offence of corporate manslaughter. The offence would enable courts to consider a wider range of management conduct than is currently possible when prosecuting a company for manslaughter and would therefore make it easier to bring prosecutions. The House will be aware of how controversial that measure has been, but also of how important it has rightly been seen in the light of serious issues that have arisen in relation to certain tragedies, particularly in the transport system. It is very much time for the Bill to be taken through the House and for responsibility for actions to be fully laid where due in any corporation or organisation. I am aware that it is difficult legislation, but I hope that all parties will give it a fair wind and be ready to support it and carry it through.

The third piece of legislation is the management of offenders and sentencing Bill. This was first introduced in the fourth Session of the previous Parliament and there will be some changes to that legislation to ensure that we can decide how best to take forward the reforms proposed in the Carter review of correctional services. The Bill will underpin the development of the National Offender Management Service, which brings together the Prison Service and the probation service. It will introduce a new day-fine system and restore confidence in the use of the fine as a credible and effective punishment.

The Bill will extend the remit of the Sentencing Guidelines Council to include consideration of the capacity of the correctional services. It will extend the use of electronic monitoring of offenders who are serving community sentences or are on bail, and it will fulfil a long-standing Government commitment to place the ombudsman for NOMS on a statutory footing. We see the establishment of a National Offender Management Service that really will achieve fair and transparent sentencing as a very important part of restoring confidence in the operation of the criminal justice system as a whole.

A further aspect of our legislation will cover immigration, asylum and identity cards and comprises two Bills. Before the election, we set out in our five-year strategy the approach that we intended to follow to reform the immigration and asylum system. Much of that does not require legislation, but the parts that do include the need to facilitate the global roll-out of fingerprinting visa applicants; the need to allow full use of biometrically enabled travel documents; the need to allow data sharing by border agents as part of the e-borders programme; the need to provide for civil penalties of £2,000 per person for employers of illegal workers; and the need to limit appeal rights for students, workers and family visits.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): The Home Secretary will recall that, before the election, he met a

[Keith Vaz]

delegation of Members who were concerned about his proposals to restrict the right of appeal in regard to visitors' visas. Has he looked again at that issue? If he has not reached a definitive view on it, will he again meet Members who have a constituency interest in this matter, so that we can explain to him the serious consequences of restricting those rights?

Mr. Clarke: I recall that meeting, and it was a valuable one. We have thought about the situation carefully, and I think that the best way to proceed would be for the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Nationality to meet that same delegation to discuss the details. I should also be happy to meet its members, if necessary, beyond that point. The fact is that some colleagues were genuinely worried about some genuine knock-on effects of our legislation on particular families in particular communities, and it is important that that should be properly taken into account.

The final piece of legislation is the identity cards Bill.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): It is thoroughly bad.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman might say that, but he will be glad to know that 80 per cent. of the country think that it is thoroughly good—and for good reason.

The Bill was published in draft in the third Session of the previous Parliament and introduced in full in the fourth Session, when it completed its passage through the Commons and had its Second Reading in the Lords before Parliament dissolved, so it has had very full consideration over two Sessions of Parliament, including a full Committee stage in this House.

The purpose of the Bill is clear. It is to establish the legal framework for the introduction of identity cards and a national identity register. It will also provide a power, at a future date, for it to be compulsory to register and to be issued with a card. It will include enabling powers so that, in future, access to specified public services could be linked to production of a valid ID card. It will establish safeguards in regard to the data that would be held and shared. I am aware of the genuine concerns across the House on the nature of those safeguards and we will, of course, be very happy to discuss them in detail to meet the concerns that anyone might have.

The Bill will create a national identity scheme commissioner, who will have oversight of the scheme, including the provision of information from the national identity register. It will create new criminal offences relating to false identity documents, including the possession of genuine documents that have been improperly obtained, or that relate to someone else. It will also provide for better identity checks to be made on passport applicants and to allow for the cross-subsidy of passport fees.

I am aware that this is a controversial piece of legislation. Genuine worries have been expressed, as well as some not-so-genuine worries. However, for the sake of this discussion, let us accept that genuine worries have been expressed about aspects of the way in which the scheme would operate. As I said on the Bill's Second Reading in the last Session, it is critical that we tackle the issues of identity fraud. They are serious issues that need to be dealt with effectively.

What I hope—perhaps it is a vain hope, but I do not think so—is that we can have a rational discussion of the various issues involved and come to a decision in Committee and elsewhere about how we proceed. I know that some of my hon. Friends have doubts, and I say to them that we will be happy to discuss those issues with them in whatever is the most effective way. I know that the Liberal Democrats are opposed in all circumstances, and will be opposed under all circumstances, and I suspect that there is not much point in talking to them—there we go, that is life, so there is nothing new as far as the Lib Dems are concerned.

As far as the Conservatives are concerned, the state of affairs is more interesting. On Second Reading, they voted for the legislation. On Third Reading, they abstained, after a shadow Cabinet rebellion led by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden against the Leader of the Opposition. In the House of Lords, in the final stages of the wash-up, they opposed the legislation. They have therefore been through the whole sequence. Throughout the election campaign, there was no clarity about what their position would be and I have seen the newspaper reports about what the leadership candidate, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, is saying on these matters. I say to him as seriously as I can that, as a potential statesman, as of course he is—a statesman is a failed politician, as I recall—I hope that he will seriously consider giving his party's support to the Bill.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden raised five questions, which I will go through, as I have written to him on them. The tests that he put forward were a fig leaf to cover the retreats and shifts of the Conservative party on the question. The first was that legislation must clearly define the purpose of the cards, and I can tell him that the legislation does so. His second was whether the technology was sufficiently well developed and robust, and the answer is yes. His third question was whether the Home Office is capable of delivering this major IT project, and the answer is yes. By the way, if the Opposition conclude that there is no conceivable IT scheme that the Home Office could carry through, he needs to examine some of the successful projects that the Government have carried through. If the entire basis of his proposition is that the Home Office, or any Department, is not capable of running any IT programme, he must disband just about every aspect of what Government do in all circumstances. The Home Office runs very successful IT schemes, as do other parts of Government.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): We have animals that are locked up at night and kept in with barbed wire during the day. Does the Home Secretary realise that the British cattle passport scheme has lost 100,000 cattle and that the National Audit Office says that it has cost £15 million a year?

Mr. Clarke: What I notice about the passport service—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I will answer the question. Since I was first a junior Minister in the Home Office, we have established the most efficient passport service across the world. I do not hide the fact for a

second that there were major issues with the passport service. The point is that they have been solved and sorted out.

Steve McCabe: I am glad that the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) is so in touch. Is it remotely possible that a potential party leader and future Prime Minister cannot make up his mind on such an issue? Is not that the question that must be answered?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right. There is no possibility that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden would not be able to make up his mind. He is a swashbuckling leader, so I am sure that he will be able to make up his mind and carry all his colleagues with him on the measure.

The right hon. Gentleman asked two other questions: whether ID cards would be cost-effective and whether they would pose a threat to civil liberties. My point, which I make in seriousness, is that we face a serious issue in relation to identity cards and the country must decide how it will deal with it. Fig leaves of the type that he suggested simply will not work and the questions that he posed do not provide an answer. He needs to answer the question.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): I know that the Home Secretary likes a bit of party political banter. The questions that my right hon. Friend and others have raised are not fig leaves, however. To return to the cost of IT, can he give an example of a major IT project in the Home Office that has come in on time and under budget?

Mr. Clarke: I can. I could give a series of examples of police projects in that category. There are plenty of them.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley) (Lab): Is it not pointless to go through the five tests presented by the Conservative party? It became clear when the Bill was in Committee—via the contribution of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry)—that in the Conservative party there are those who are opposed in principle and say so, those who are opposed in principle and say the opposite for reasons of expediency, and those who are opposed in principle and say nothing.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right and has summed up the position well. I appeal to the Conservatives to show the same candour and to all who have views on the issue to make them clear.

Mr. Oaten: In the letter that he sent just a couple of hours ago to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), in response to the five tests, the Home Secretary said that the ID card scheme would be cost-effective, but did not say how much it would cost. Will he tell the House how much it will cost?

Mr. Clarke: That will be published when the Bill is published. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but that is entirely the right way to do it. We will publish the figures so that they can be analysed.

The £1.2 billion Airwave scheme for police radios is one example of major schemes that have been delivered on time, effectively and, in fact, under budget.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I am enormously grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way on a point of such importance. I hope that he accepts that some of us are deeply uneasy about the ID card scheme. We believe that this is a question of civil rights, and it disturbs us greatly. The history of the holding of every element of information about people's lives by police forces or Governments suggests not that such information is always used responsibly, but that, in some instances, it is used by Governments for the worst possible reasons.

Mr. Clarke: I appreciate that my hon. Friend and others have such concerns. When the Bill is published, I should like her to look in detail at the range of information on certain individuals that we are discussing, which is not in fact substantial, and at how it operates. I should also like her to look at the safeguards. An enormous range of information is already held in both the public sector—on police information databases, on the police national computer and in fingerprint records—and in the private sector, in relation to such matters as financial dealings. I respect her point of view, but I ask her to read the Bill carefully and balance those considerations against the benefits to society that would arise from it.

As I said at the outset, I am not prepared to embark on an election campaign in the future while deep concerns throughout society about antisocial behaviour, criminal justice and sentencing, and immigration and asylum can provide fuel for irresponsible political parties. The purpose of the whole of this Parliament, and the Queen's Speech in particular, is to lay the foundations for the elimination of the problems that exist and that are perceived to exist. That is our commitment and I hope it will be supported by Members in all parts of the House.

4.13 pm

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Before I deal with the Queen's Speech, let me say a few words about synthetic outrage.

During the campaign that we have been discussing, the Home Secretary engaged in three debates with me before, during and after the publication of the documents to which he referred. Not once did he suggest that any of the documents were dishonourable or ill meant in any way. As he said, he wrote to me earlier today, and not once in his letter was this outrage mentioned. I shall therefore treat his opening comments in the way that they deserve—as theatrical rather than real.

Let me say this to the Home Secretary: any party that publishes posters such as the two published by the Labour party before the election campaign should be very careful indeed when referring to dishonourable conduct. I will talk later about honesty of argument when we discuss the counter-terrorist legislation that the Government forced through the House in the last weeks before the election. We will talk about the honesty of the arguments advanced by the Prime Minister at that time. I will hear then what the Home Secretary has to say.

[David Davis]

The Opposition welcome at least three proposals in what is a massive Queen's Speech. First, we agree with some of the powers to deal with terrorism. We have been calling for an offence of acts preparatory to terrorism for some time. It will fill a loophole in the country's security and may prevent the Government from creating any more of the unnecessary, ineffective and illiberal legislation that they have proposed in recent months.

Secondly, we welcome the measures that the Home Secretary mentioned to strengthen the charitable sector. That area needs serious reform, and the only reason that it was not dealt with before the election is that it needs very serious scrutiny. It is a complex matter.

Thirdly, violent crime is out of control. Its growth is clearly related to drugs and alcohol. The Home Secretary made a number of sensible suggestions, which we welcome, but they will not tackle the roots of the problem.

The Queen's Speech is heavily focused on home affairs. It is no secret why: the Government know that the British people are deeply worried about law and order. Ministers have failed and they have been found out. From immigration to street crime, from guns to drug crime, from violence to basic disorder, the Government have lost control.

In the past, the Government have adopted a Newton's law approach to law making. For every hostile headline, there has been an equal and opposite piece of gimmicky legislation. Not every social ill demands an equal and opposite law. Some need a fundamentally different approach. What matters is passing good and effective laws and taking proper and concerted action to tackle some of the deep-seated problems that we face. When the Government set out on a course to do that and stick to it, they will receive our support. It is with that principle in mind that I will look at the specific proposals and issues raised in the Queen's Speech.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman talked about honesty. Can he be honest with the House about whether the Opposition will oppose the identity cards Bill?

David Davis: I will give the hon. Gentleman the arguments on identity cards later in my speech when I deal with the issues in the letter that the Home Secretary wrote to me.

On crime, I welcome the fact that the Government have said that they will take action on issues raised during the general election campaign: violence, social disorder, drug abuse and drunkenness. The Government have committed themselves again to creating safe and secure communities as well as fostering a culture of respect. But surely it is reasonable to ask what has happened to those communities and to that culture of respect in the past eight years. Which Government have presided over the corrosion of discipline in our schools, the growth of drunken disorder on our streets and the disarray of our police forces faced with the burden of bureaucracy, targets and red tape?

Let us look at the Government's performance on their own measure. In October 2002, the then Home Secretary, the then Lord Chancellor and the Attorney-General published a document called, "Narrowing the Justice Gap". The justice gap is recorded crime less solved crime: it is a measure of unsolved crime, a measure of uncaught and unpunished criminals. That document said:

> "The justice gap . . . is the key measure of the effectiveness of the criminal justice system, and a crucial indicator of success in reducing crime."

I agree. To listen to the Home Secretary, one would think that the Government cut the justice gap. Not a bit of it. It has grown by almost 1 million since the Government came to power. There are now 900,000 more crimes not being solved each year than there were in 1998. That means that, each year, the perpetrators of 5.5 million crimes are not brought to justice—that 5.5 million victims see the perpetrators of the crimes against them walking free. What is the Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety's answer to that? Her answer is to dress criminals up in orange suits, an idea so irrelevant that even Downing street dropped it within 24 hours.

None the less, the Minister did manage to get the Home Secretary into trouble. The headline on the front page of yesterday's edition of *The Sunday Telegraph* was, "Six falsehoods in 100 seconds: how the Home Secretary misled public over 'yob crackdown'." Despite the Home Secretary's opening remarks, I have a higher opinion of him than that. I do not believe that he deliberately misled the public but rather that this situation demonstrates all too clearly the careless way in which the Government have designed their gimmicky and ineffective crime strategy.

Of course, the Government love playing with statistics. They love to claim that crime is coming down, which nobody believes, least of all those in the communities that suffer the most.

Tom Levitt: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman is going down the same route that his party went down in its newspaper advertisements during the general election campaign. He is comparing crime statistics that were compiled on different bases and comparing different reporting techniques, and attempting to show a difference. Does he welcome the intervention by the chief constable of Derbyshire police at the beginning of the general election campaign? The chief constable wrote to all the local newspapers to put the facts about the fall in crime in Derbyshire on the record, so that no politician could fall into the trap of misleading the public—as the right hon. Gentleman is doing now, and as his party's advertisements did during the general election—by not acknowledging changes in reporting techniques.

David Davis: I did not see the intervention by the Derbyshire chief constable, but I did see that by the chief constable of North Wales police, which, I think, made a similar point. He said that violent crime is not growing because of the change in the basis on which such crime is measured. *[Interruption.]* Of course, the Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety—she is muttering, and I will give way to her in a moment if she wants me to—said herself that the limit was 20 per cent. Violent crime in north Wales grew by 120 per cent., so even after that adjustment is made, there was still a 100 per cent. increase in violent crime. Across the

country as a whole, the figure is 84 per cent., so even if we knock off the 20 per cent., there was still a two-thirds increase in violent crime.

Gun crime has doubled, and as the Home Secretary himself recognises, there has been a massive increase in knife crime, so there is a need to act on gun and knife crime. Who is telling the truth here? Is the Home Secretary just trying to invent another scare story—is he just expressing his own view—or is this real? The increase in violent crime is real, and for reasons that I will explain in a moment.

Let me pursue this question of a reduction in crime. There are indeed some reductions. Some of the recorded crime statistics have come down, but I must point out that the Government can claim zero credit for much of that. Recorded instances of burglary are coming down. Is that because more burglars are getting caught? No, it is because detection rates for burglary under this Government have dropped by a third, so fewer burglars are getting caught. Perhaps the explanation is that burglars fear prison. Under this Government, half of all first-conviction burglars go to prison, so that is not the answer. The real reason why burglary is going down is that it has become more difficult and less lucrative—it is as simple as that. Burglar alarms, better locks and more secure doors and windows make burglary more difficult. Some 10 years ago, the burglar who stole a video recorder could sell it for £100. Today, last year's video recorder will fetch a fiver in the pub. The risks have gone up and the rewards have gone down, but the criminal has not gone away.

Steve McCabe: It may have escaped the right hon. Gentleman's attention that some of the reductions that he is talking about are a direct result of Government targets. That is a reality that cannot be challenged. When the chief superintendent responsible for the operational command unit in my constituency publishes figures showing crime reductions across the board, is he a liar?

David Davis: Unlike the Home Secretary, I am not in that business, but I will say this: the Government may have too many targets, but even I do not think that they have targets for double glazing, locks on doors and burglar alarms.

Let us deal with what happens to those crimes. The crimes may decrease, but the criminals do not go away. They go into other, more lucrative crimes—anything from liquor smuggling to drug dealing—that are safer and easier, and which generate more violent crime. Nobody, not even the Home Secretary, seriously disputes today that drink and drugs are the source of violent crime. Yet the Government have presided over an explosion of drink and drug-related crime.

What have they done about it? Worse than nothing. The Government's response to the problem of binge drinking was more drinking, longer drinking, easier drinking and 24-hour drinking. Today, we hear that the drinks industry is facing up to its responsibilities. If only the Government would do the same.

At the same time, drug addicts are faced with the lowest drug prices ever. In some urban areas, the price of cocaine is falling below that of a cappuccino. Drugs are flooding our streets because we have lost control of our borders and until the Government get a grip on our borders, this will continue. No wonder people are taking hard drugs. No wonder that 70 per cent. of theft is linked to drug addiction.

While trying to sound tough on drugs, the Government took the foolish decision to reclassify cannabis against the advice of the police, doctors and their own drugs tsar. As the ex-Cabinet Minister, Chris Smith—hardly an old fuddy-duddy—pointed out:

> "Within the last two years cannabis use has rocketed among young people because it's widely available and cheap, so youngsters will try it . . . Kids do not even perceive it to be illegal any more."

Whose fault is that?

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I have always believed that the law on drugs should be guided by the scientific evidence. If the advice is that a drug should be classified as more or less dangerous, that is what we should presume to follow. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree?

David Davis: Yes, I do. One reason why the decision to reclassify was ill founded was that the Government did not take into account some of the evidence on psychosis that the current chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs says he knew at the time. The risks of psychosis from cannabis use are serious, which is the basis of the argument. Although it grieves me to do it, I will pay a compliment to the Home Secretary who is at least reviewing the decision, but it was ludicrous in the first place.

The new Labour Government have failed to deal with the causes of violent crime—drink and drugs—and are failing to deal with criminals. A proper criminal justice system punishes the criminals and reduces crime. It does that by taking criminals out of circulation—typically, by putting them in prison—and by deterring them from committing crime, generally by the threat of prison. It does so also by rehabilitation, again usually in prison. However, the Government do not intend to create enough prison places to cope with the expected 100,000 prisoners by the end of the decade.

Instead, they will use community service and fines to punish criminals. Clearly such punishments do not take criminals out of circulation. Equally clearly, they do not deter, even with the prospect of the Minister of State's orange suits. Nor do they rehabilitate. The hardest group of offenders to deal with are drug addicts, yet the Government's flagship drug treatment and testing orders have had a dreadful outcome. Two thirds of those concerned have failed to complete the course and 90 per cent. have been reconvicted.

We need to offer kids ladders out of drug dependency. At the general election, we set out a proposal to increase tenfold the number of residential rehab places. A Conservative Government would have done that. Our approach would have offered an escape from the cycle of misery that afflicts too many youngsters today. Conservative proposals would have offered a positive and constructive solution to this most terrible of problems. At least the Government are recognising the need for action on violent crime by promoting the Bill on this matter, but they are failing miserably to deal with

[David Davis]

the root cause of that crime. As a result of that failed strategy, recorded crime is up by 750,000 in the past eight years, with violent crime up by more than 80 per cent. Even where crime rates are falling, it is the result of factors beyond the Government's control.

What the Government can control is the number of police out on the beat, yet as we saw last week from the Police Federation, more and more officers are spending more and more of their time inside police stations, not on the beat catching criminals. The Government are tying up our police forces in red tape and targets and, as a direct result, cutting their effectiveness.

The Government can also control the effectiveness of sentences, yet they are failing to enforce effective sentences and are instead wasting money on expensive gimmicks that do nothing to lead criminals away from the temptation to commit crime.

Those are the practical things that the Queen's Speech could have addressed, which we could have been debating today but which will clearly have to wait for another time and another Government.

Steve McCabe: That is a long time to wait.

David Davis: I shall bring the hon. Gentleman something for which there is a shorter wait.

More than a year ago, we exposed the chaos and shambles that the Government had inflicted on our immigration system. From the Government, first we had denial, then we had cover-up, and then the lid came off the whole show and a Minister had to resign. At long last, the Government are now beginning to respond to the crisis in our immigration system. We welcome some of the measures planned, but the Government's proposals for e-borders will take around five years to set up fully. That will be 12 years after they did away with extra European Union embarkation controls, and this is a time of high national security threat. That is nothing short of irresponsible.

We welcome the 600 extra immigration officers announced by the Prime Minister in his speech in Dover, but let me remind the House that the number of failed asylum seekers had to exceed 200,000 before action was taken. The Government are in a state of perpetual crisis management and, I am afraid, they are still more prone to crisis than to management in this regard.

This week, the Government were trumpeting their success on asylum applications, which they have managed to get down to the level that they inherited from us. That is their success. Of course we welcome the reduction, but at the same time the number of removals has fallen for the past several quarters from 5,000 to fewer than 3,500. There is little chance that the Government will achieve their target of more failed asylum seekers being removed than arriving if that trend continues.

Astonishingly, this Government are still complacent. In the Home Secretary's introduction to his five-year plan, he stated:

"the system that we have . . . works well"—

a system that has seen the cavalier disregard of the rules become the norm in the Home Office; a system that has seen immigration triple; a system that has seen the immigration and nationality budget grow from £200 million to nearly £2 billion. I hope that we never experience a system that the Home Secretary thinks is working badly.

Dr. Evan Harris: It is not racist to talk about immigration and asylum, but the right hon. Gentleman will accept that there are racists in the electorate, and I have no doubt of his personal opposition to racism in all its forms. However, would he have been happier with racists who were worried about immigration and asylum voting Conservative, or for any other mainstream party, in the last election, or would he rather that they had voted for the British National party?

David Davis: I think it was the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) who, when he met a racist, said to that constituent, "I hope this man does not vote for me." I would have said the same thing.

Let us consider the Prime Minister's stance on the terrorism powers. The House will remember that this February on "Woman's Hour"—a more august, perceptive and questioning body than the Cabinet—

John Bercow: That is not difficult.

David Davis: No, it is not.

On "Woman's Hour", the Prime Minister said:

"There are several hundred of them in this country who, we believe, are engaged in plotting or trying to commit terrorist acts".

Only weeks later, he was rushing through the House a poorly drafted Bill to deal with the issue—a Bill that assaulted the ancient rights of the British people and challenged the assumption of innocence, habeas corpus and the entire concept of a fair trial under British law.

What happened to the hundreds of terrorists roaming our streets? Just before the election, we fought hard in the House over control orders. How many people, in the ensuing six weeks, were placed under such an order? Outside of those released from Belmarsh and similar secure institutions, there were none. Lord Tebbit asked the question six weeks after the Bill entered into law, and the answer was "Not one." I believe that it is the case—no doubt we will hear in due course—that in the last few weeks one person has had a control order placed on them. So much for the hundreds of terrorists to whom the Prime Minister referred. Was it just convenience that they appeared and then disappeared in the run-up to an election? Terrorism is a very dangerous area in which to cry wolf. The House will be aware that, accordingly, we will hold the Government to their promise to review and replace that hasty terrorism legislation in the coming year. We will make sure of that.

It goes without saying that we welcome powers that really will combat terrorism. Introducing laws to deal with acts preparatory to terrorism will help us to deal with people planning terrorist acts; I agree with the Home Secretary on that. I have to tell him, however, that if what I read in the papers is correct, I am concerned about the offence of condoning acts of

terrorism. I should like to read to the House two quotes from persons commenting on terrorism in Palestine. The first person said that

"young people feel they have got no hope but to blow themselves up".

The second said:

"If I had to live in that situation . . . I might just consider becoming one myself".

Do those quotes condone the acts of suicide bombers? Would those people have been charged under the new powers? Are we about to lock them up? The first quote is from the wife of the Prime Minister, and the second is from Jenny Tonge, when she was a Member of the House. As much as I have my differences with the individuals in question, I do not believe that we should be locking them up. *[Interruption.]* There may be some dispute, but I do not believe in locking them up.

We must be very clear about what the powers seek to do. New Labour has a habit of making bad law to rush in pursuit of a headline, so we will ensure that all the new powers are exposed to proper scrutiny. The hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird), who is sitting on the Parliamentary Private Secretaries' Bench, should take note; she should be interested in this.

As the Home Secretary knows, we fundamentally disagree on the provisions relating to religious hatred. I understand the Government's aims in trying to prevent religious hatred, but I sometimes wonder whether they understand the implication of their own proposals. This is their third attempt to introduce these powers, so I will repeat my objections from the previous two attempts. For centuries, the United Kingdom has had a tradition of religious tolerance and, at the same time, a tradition of extremely robust religious disputation. We live in a healthy society, in which religious freedom and free speech have co-existed to the advantage of all. These joint freedoms have contributed in no small measure to the intellectual vigour of our society. They spawned the creativity that fostered a wealth of talent in many areas, from science to satire. Freedom of speech is one of the great virtues and, simultaneously, one of the great strengths of British society. These powers will curb freedom of speech where such freedom is entirely appropriate. Unlike race, religion is a matter of choice: choice of belief, value, practice and behaviour. This Bill would sacrifice freedom of speech and freedom of religious belief for little or no gain, and we will oppose it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): I appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman is saying; in no circumstances should religion be exempt from criticism—far from it. Does he accept, however, that some of the arguments that he is putting forward regarding free speech were used by his predecessors 30 or 40 years ago strenuously to oppose legislation on incitement to race hatred? Then we were told that the legislation would be an attack on the freedom of speech that we had treasured for centuries. No one now on the Conservative Benches, including the right hon. Gentleman, would like to see that legislation repealed; it is now accepted. I believe that, if the legislation on incitement to religious hatred proceeds, it will not be challenged in the years ahead.

David Davis: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says but I disagree with him because, in addition to the reasons I have just given relating to our society and its commitment to free speech, I believe that the Bill will have the opposite effect to what the Government intend on relationships between religions.

Ms Abbott: To return to the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the whole House supports effective legislation to prevent terrorism; the problem with that ill-thought-out legislation is that, in the short term, it will bear down most heavily on our Muslim and other immigrant communities. Ill-thought-out legislation that cuts across centuries of civil liberties is more likely to create terrorists than to fight terrorism.

David Davis: The hon. Lady is right. When the legislation was introduced, I argued that it would act as a recruiting sergeant for al-Qaeda. All it would take would be one popular individual—perhaps a young Muslim—to be made subject to a control order or, in an extreme case, put under house arrest under the legislation, to ensure that not only that individual but every member of their family, every friend and everyone who knew of their case became a potential recruit for radicalisation. One of the reasons why this country has survived for centuries without revolution is that we have been able to maintain our freedom and tolerance throughout that period. The countries that have adopted the most aggressive stances at the expense of civil liberties are often the ones that have suffered most.

Kali Mountford: Given what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, in a very considered tone, will he join my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in his attempts to bring communities together in a consensus-building exercise to decide what is the right direction for this country, to ensure that everyone feels safe here, to include in the process communities that might otherwise feel excluded, and to ensure that the legislation that emerges is right for this country?

David Davis: I am entirely happy to be involved in any discussions with the various communities of our country, but the legislation deals with matters that are fundamental to the freedoms of any British citizen, whatever his religion, background or creed. One of the most important aspects of the discussion of the measure was embodied in an offer that we made in the Lords, I believe, to allow the entry into law of the approach now taken by the Crown Prosecution Service when comments or acts expressing religious hatred are simply a masquerade for race hatred. As I understand it, if the CPS thinks that an individual who attacks a Muslim is really attacking that person because of their race rather than their religion, it will treat the attack as an act of racial hatred. I would be happy for such a provision to become law, because in those circumstances, religious hatred is merely a proxy for racial hatred. However, I am sorry to tell the hon. Lady that, beyond those circumstances, I cannot see how the proposed legislation can be made acceptable in the context of our long-standing traditions of both religious tolerance and religious freedom and freedom of speech.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is being generous in taking interventions. May I suggest that part of Britain's history is a tale of

[Chris Bryant]

great religious intolerance, both by the state and by groups of individuals? Surely we need to do something to protect those who have no opportunity to share a faith, to hold a faith, to exercise their faith and to worship without other people inciting hatred of them solely on the basis of their faith?

David Davis: Were we talking a few centuries ago, I would agree with the hon. Gentleman, but such an environment has not been prevalent for the past couple of centuries, and in those areas where there has been hatred, it has mainly been racially based. The problem is that that will not advance the case. We will see something corroded that is fundamental to the British civilisation. The shopping list of those who are upset by the proposed legislation does not consist of intolerant people or those who masquerade. It does not consist of members of the British National party. The list contains those who are concerned about the importance of—

Chris Bryant: They have not been prosecuted.

David Davis: When I responded earlier about the possibility of some compromise, I talked about putting into law the Crown Prosecution Service method. That was in mind of some extremist parties' behaviour and in dealing with them. Beyond that, I do not see a way of doing what the Government are trying to do that would preserve the rights and freedoms of British people of all creeds and cults.

In terms of things that are difficult to make judgments on, we come to ID cards. I suppose that it is a subject of importance sacrificed for little or no gain, given the proposals. We have been here before. When the Government last brought their proposals before the House, we set a number of tests. The Home Secretary seems to think that they are fig leaves. Is purpose a fig leaf? I understand that, with this Government, purpose may be a fig leaf. There is a potential cost of £10 billion or £20 billion. Is that a fig leaf? Are the fundamental rights and privacies of British citizens a fig leaf? The Home Secretary's Department has the most unmitigated record of wreckage of IT projects in modern history. Is that a fig leaf?

The Home Secretary is unlucky because, as a Public Accounts Committee Chairman, I watched the Home Office for four years, and the right hon. Gentleman is about to hear some of the lessons that I learned. Let us start with the summary points. The points of the tests were to establish the balance or imbalance between serious principles—principles that the right hon. Gentleman agreed mattered—and the competence or incompetence of the proposal before us. It seems that the Government are asking Parliament to make a decision on a scheme that they have still not yet properly worked out themselves. The scheme is so ill thought out that it is by no means clear that the technology will be foolproof or that the costs will be controllable. Furthermore, it is not clear that the Home Office could manage the scheme. We must remember that if we depend on the scheme for our security and it fails or is subverted, we are far worse off than we were without it.

Steve McCabe: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Davis: I am having a recognition problem with somebody's identity.

I reiterate the point that if the proposed system is built as a centrepiece of our security and it fails, we are far worse off than we were when we started.

I have had a written intervention from the Home Secretary, which came this morning about an hour or two before business started. The right hon. Gentleman sent me a letter. Given his opening, it was quite surprising that he started "Dear David". He attempts to go through the tests:

> "Legislation must clearly define the purpose of the cards."

He gives me a list, which he could have taken from my opening speech—no priority, no costing and no quantitative achievement. It is just a list.

The right hon. Gentleman then goes on with whether the technology is sufficiently well developed and robust. His opening sentence reads:

> "The Identity Cards Bill is enabling legislation",

which is to miss the point. That is because the Bill proposes to change the relationship between the British citizen and his or her Government. It is a massively important constitutional Bill; no one should be under any misapprehension about that. The point is that unless the technology works, frankly we do not want to touch it at all. However, the Home Secretary wants to introduce the Bill before he knows whether the technology will work. Since it will not work for eight years, one must ask, "Why the rush?"

The Home Secretary's letter goes on to talk about the biometric technology and how the chief scientist will examine it. I do not know about other hon. Members, but I have received several letters from experts in this area, especially experts on biometrics, expressing extreme doubts about the viability and reliability of the technology, and the possible levels of errors, false positives, false negatives and other problems associated with it. However, as I shall explain in a minute, even if the biometrics work perfectly, there are fundamental flaws in the proposal.

The Home Secretary's letter goes on to discuss whether the Home Office is capable of delivering such a major information technology project. He talks about how the Government use IT in all sorts of ways. The examples that he gives are informative. First, on pensions, I do not know whether many hon. Members have had problems over the past few weeks with the new card-and-chip system for pensioners, but I have. I have constituents who have not received their pension for five or six weeks as a result of the wonderful system that has been introduced—not by the Home Office on this occasion, but by a more competent Department.

The letter goes on to cite passports. I do not know whether anyone remembers the pictures of the queues round the block of people who were desperate to get their passports to go on holiday. On one occasion, I even had a member of the private office of one Home Office Minister go to get one of my constituent's passports from the heaps of boxes in Lunar house so that she could go to her own marriage in Malaysia the next week. It was one of the most unmitigated IT disasters of modern times and was run by—guess who—the Home Office.

The Minister of Communities and Local Government (Mr. David Miliband): It was not commissioned by us.

David Davis: The system was run by the Home Office, so it makes no difference who commissioned it. I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman if he wants to intervene.

Mr. Miliband: I was pointing out from a sedentary position that on the passports saga, the plan was commissioned by the Conservative Government and sorted out by us.

David Davis: As I said about the Home Secretary's comments on the immigration service working well, if that was sorting out, heaven help us from something that goes wrong.

The Home Secretary's letter also states how the Government successfully handled the fingerprint system. He has forgotten that that also broke down only three or four months ago, so police forces throughout the country could not get fingerprints identified for about two or three weeks. Such systems are intrinsically difficult to run and his Department is not very good at running them.

I shall cite one further example to the House, which was dealt with by Mr. Bichard under the Home Secretary's predecessor. We all remember Soham. The backdrop to Soham was the Home Office's inability to get an IT system working throughout the country for all our police forces. On the basis of that fact, the Home Secretary has not made a good case that the Home Office could run the ID system.

The letter says that ID cards must be the most cost-effective way of tackling the problems that they seek to address. The central point of that short paragraph is that the cost of the scheme would be recovered from charges to card applicants—so it does not matter, sir. The cost will not be on the Home Office budget because the 83 or 160 quid—whatever the cost—will be met by ordinary citizens when they pay for their passports, driving licences and other documents.

The Home Secretary makes no attempt to respond to suggestions that the scheme might cost between £10 billion and £20 billion. I would not care to guess how many border guards we could get, how many new systems to prevent welfare fraud we could introduce, or how much we could do on counter-terrorism for £10 billion or £20 billion. However, the matter certainly has not been addressed in the letter.

The letter says that ID cards must not pose a threat to civil liberties. I shall be fair to the Home Secretary, because he has at least made one attempt in that respect. We complained when it was suggested that someone outside the civil service would get a 10-year sentence for misusing the data, while someone inside the civil service would get only two years, so I think that was corrected. He has made some minor attempts to deal with the threat to civil liberties, but there is an intrinsic weakness in the proposal, which gives rise to the civil liberty problem. It came up when I was trying to reach a conclusion as to how to deal with the matter before Second Reading.

I went to see a number of senior policemen. Every one of them supported the Home Secretary's view on ID cards, so I asked them a simple question: what would they do to stop someone using one of the 20,000 access points to the database to put in a programme, commonly known as a virus? Let us say, for the sake of argument, that such a virus would make my biometrics, if they were interrogated, lead to the answer "yes" to any identity, so I could claim to be Charles Clarke, Michael Howard, Tony Blair or whoever, and the database would say yes every time. *[Interruption.]* There are already two David Davises.

Those were very intelligent men—heads of police forces and so on, some of the most senior policemen in the country. None of them had an answer, and I have not yet heard an answer to the question how we will stop tampering with the IT system that will be at the centre of the scheme. That is much more important than the little bit of plastic. The database at the centre is what brings about a change in the relationship between the individual and the state. The Government have no answer as to how they will protect that database. The Home Secretary's only answer to the problem was, "Other people are doing the same thing." That is a pretty weak answer on a matter of such importance.

Mr. Oaten: The shadow Home Secretary has made an excellent case in demonstrating that his five questions have not been answered. Will he be opposing ID cards—yes or no?

David Davis: I repeat what I said: those questions must be answered before we can approve the Bill. On an issue of such importance, which represents such a fundamental change in the relationship between citizen and state, the Government must make the case and conclusively prove the need for such a change. They have not done so, and until they do, I cannot recommend that my party support the proposals.

I have touched on some of the issues raised in the Queen's Speech. There are many hours of important debate and discussion to come, when the specific proposals will be analysed in full, but today we can focus only on the broad thrust of the proposals. Although our intentions are positive, our hopes are not high. For eight years the Government have been characterised by complacency, incompetence and failure, followed by gimmicks, posturing and soundbites.

We have seen cash point fines proposed and abandoned. We have seen night courts proposed and abandoned. We have seen child curfews proposed, introduced and abandoned. We have seen the Government supposedly determined to crack down on antisocial behaviour, then encouraging 24-hour drinking. Drug use is rampant on our streets; the Government's response is to slacken the cannabis laws.

When the Labour Government fail to deliver, they are drawn to one response above all others—the gimmick. Headline-grabbing initiatives and poorly developed policy are designed to achieve media coverage and create a spurious impression that the Government are in touch with and are tackling people's concerns. We have seen those initiatives come and go. Now the Government have been given one last chance. People have made it clear what their priorities are, and they have entrusted the Government with that job. Our job is to support them where support is due, and to hold them to account when they are going wrong. In the coming

[David Davis]

months we shall do our job to the full. After eight years, it is about time the Government did theirs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I remind the House that Mr. Speaker has placed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which operates from now.

4.59 pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my constituents for sending me back to the House for the 10th time. My obligation to them is to carry on working on their behalf, regardless of their religion or ethnic origin, and to try to ensure that a good Labour Government work well in their favour.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has dealt with a number of the issues that relate to the legislation proposed in the Queen's Speech. When it comes to the issue of immigration, my constituents are grateful for the fact that the primary purpose rule was abolished. They still remember it eight years later. They are grateful for the fact that an appeal system has been introduced for visitor visas, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will maintain that.

The problem for my constituents too often is that where the policy on paper is one that they find acceptable and attractive, in implementation it does not always work as well as it ought to do, and they have asked me, during the election campaign and since, to represent to the Government that after eight years of welcome office, which my constituents have supported throughout, the Government should get a much stronger grip on the immigration and nationality directorate of the Home Office so that the policies work in the way that my constituents wish them to do.

There are two aspects to that. First, there are aspects relating to the bureaucracy preventing my constituents from obtaining what is their right. If, as I do, I have a constituent who serves in the armed forces, who has served in Afghanistan and who later this year is to serve in Iraq, it is absurd to say that because there are problems with my constituent's wife's immigration record she should go back to, of all places, Zimbabwe, to apply for readmission to this country. Where a constituent of mine has had her husband allowed, under the Government's legislation, to join her in this country and has then given birth to twins, and the husband has then violated his permission to remain in this country by leaving her and not sustaining the marriage, that constituent, who has been on the telephone to me again today, has a right to believe that that man, with no proper basis to remain in this country, should be thrown out of this country, rather than, although illegally here, obtaining legal aid to try to gain access to those babies until they are 18-years-old. I very much hope that in this Parliament we will deal with the reality of cases and not allow bureaucracy to get in the way of cases.

Again and again—I have written to my right hon. Friend about cases even during the general election campaign—constituents of mine with work permits awarded to them by the immigration and nationality directorate, who have been offered jobs by employers who wish them to take up those jobs, are being sent back to countries of origin such as Bangladesh in order to obtain the right to remain here even though they have work permits. I have several such cases now, and such absurdities should be stamped on by my right hon. Friend.

On the other hand, I strongly believe that where people are blatantly violating the immigration rules the Home Office should act on that and remove them from the country. At a recent surgery, a woman from Iran came to me with a letter from the Home Office that said, in bold and underlined, "You must now leave the country." She had no intention whatever of leaving the country and said that she had come to me to ask if her National Asylum Support Service payments could be resumed. My constituents, of whatever ethnic origin, think it unjust that people who live in accommodation provided by the National Asylum Support Service should insist on remaining here when they have no right to do so. They want such people to be thrown out of this country and immigration law to work firmly, but they also want people who have a good case for remaining in this country to be treated in a sympathetic and practical way.

My constituency is a dispersal constituency for asylum seekers. Some of those people have no right to be in this country because their applications and appeals have failed—such cases may involve people who have failed to gain access to an immigration appeal tribunal, who have failed in their appeal to that decision and who have failed the human rights appeal, too. People who have exhausted every single immigration process are remaining in this country and doing their best to live on my constituents' taxes. I say to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that although good cases are treated well, it is about time that bad cases were dealt with firmly. The people of Gorton want people who will work and contribute to the economy to live in Gorton. At the same time, some people simply want to batten on to my tax-paying constituents, and I cannot see why my constituents should put up with it.

During the general election campaign, the Conservative party dealt with immigration in a disgusting way—when I was walking along the street, a man of African origin said to me, "They talk about me as though I cannot hear what they are saying." Those politics operate on the basis that large numbers of people who are citizens of this country or who have the right to remain in this country are somehow beyond the pale. If the Leader of the Opposition had substituted "Jews" for "immigrants", when he discussed immigration during the general election, people would have said that he was conducting an anti-Semitic campaign. Anti-Semitism is bad and racism is bad, and the Conservative party conducted the nastiest, filthiest campaign of my political life on that issue. What is more, it conducted the campaign on the advice of a Commonwealth immigrant, who contributed nothing to the economy and who, having pocketed his money from the Conservative party, is returning to the country from which he emigrated.

My constituents, of whatever ethnic origin, are not racists—they are fair and decent, and they want people to be given a chance. At the same time, when people exhaust every single process in the Government's decent legislation, are told to leave and do not do so, I expect my right hon. Friend to deal with them, including those

who ignore deportation orders. Immigration policy must be fair and firm: in these years of Labour Government, I look to my right hon. Friend to make sure that the fairness continues, that the firmness is enforced and that all of my constituents, regardless of ethnic origin, have confidence in this Government's immigration policies.

5.9 pm

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, which got off to a slightly grumpy start with the Home Secretary's analysis of the election campaign. I do not intend to go down that route. I hope that my party generally tried to fight a positive campaign. Frankly, we would have been unable to mount such a poster campaign even if we had wanted to, as we do not have the money—that is a heart-breaker. However, we are very good value for money in terms of the number of MPs we delivered for the amount of money that we spent. I would say this about the campaign: politicians must sometimes be prepared to argue things on the doorstep knowing that they are unpopular and try to change individuals' views on the basis of their strongly held opinion instead of testing out those views in advance in market research and opinion polling and adjusting one's poster campaign and message. That is an important principle that this party will stick to when it fights election campaigns.

As for the range of measures in the Queen's Speech, Liberal Democrat Members will give our support to some; we believe that the Government's long-term intention is right on others, although the way in which they are trying to get there is wrong; and we are fundamentally opposed to the rest. The charities Bill is long overdue. We welcome it and will give it our support; it is a pity that it fell because of a lack of parliamentary time.

On religious hatred, I share many of the concerns that were articulated by the shadow Secretary of State, particularly in trying to ensure that we protect freedom of speech. There are ways around this. We certainly support what the Government intend to do, but we need to consider whether we can additionally deal with concerns to do with racial hatred. Some of the measures that were discussed in Committee need to be looked at again. The Home Secretary's response to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) was helpful. Considering the blasphemy laws as part of the review is a constructive way forward. We will work with the Government on this, but as things stand we are very uneasy about what is being suggested.

It is welcome that, after the 40 or so hours that we sat when we debated the terrorism legislation, the Home Secretary has kept his promise to bring it back and reconsider it. I am very proud of the role that my party took in ensuring that when it came to balancing the principles of civil liberty with ensuring that this country is safe, we and our colleagues in the other Chamber fought strongly to ensure that civil liberties were protected. At no point during the passage of that legislation did I feel that Liberal Democrats were suggesting anything that would make this country less safe from a terrorist attack.

I am pleased that the Government are returning to the idea that was discussed during that debate concerning new measures on acts preparatory to terrorism. As we argued then, the best way to deal with that is to have new criminal offences and take people through the proper criminal procedure. However, I am worried by press reports suggesting the creation of other measures to do with condoning terrorism. That will be difficult to judge and gets us into the same difficult territory as religious hatred. I am nervous about that and would want to see the detail of what exactly the Home Secretary has in mind.

I am disappointed that, if the press reports are true, the Home Secretary is not looking at the question of intercept communications. We made a powerful case for considering the way in which other European countries have made phone tapping admissible in court cases, and I hope that the Home Secretary will still leave the window open for including that in the detailed measures that he brings forward in the autumn. Although I accept that intercept evidence would not have helped in the Belmarsh cases, it may be useful at some point in terms of having a proper criminal procedure.

We will want to probe the Home Secretary on the current regime of control orders because it is unacceptable that Parliament will not be given regular information about how many people are being held under them. We want to ensure that that information is given to Parliament not as and when the Home Secretary decides to announce it.

Mr. Charles Clarke: The commitment given in the debate to provide regular reports to the House on control orders—I recollect that they will be made every three months—will obviously be met exactly as was stated to the House in the last Session.

Mr. Oaten: The Home Secretary is aware that we believe that if somebody is put under a control order, we should not have to wait two and a half months for that information to be known, particularly given the gravity of taking away somebody's liberty in such circumstances. We shall want to revisit our plea on the standard of the burden of proof, and to look again at the role of the judge versus the politician on non-derogation control orders.

These are difficult issues. Many of us feared that, in the run-up to the general election, there would be a Madrid-style attack in this country. We should put on record the debt that we owe to the police and the intelligence services for ensuring that such an atrocity did not take place.

We will examine the Government's new proposals on terrorism seriously, and I genuinely hope that there can be cross-party support on the issue so that we can put in place a proper mechanism. That said, this party will continue to defend civil liberties, including in relation to identity cards.

The shadow Home Secretary's speech was extraordinary. I do not know where he is now—he has probably gone to buy some creosote to paint on his fence, which must be very large for the whole Conservative party to sit on it. The Conservatives need to make up their minds where they stand on the issue. The Conservative party has put forward a set of five questions, and it is clear from any analysis of those questions that they have not been answered. During the election campaign, I went around studios speaking with

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Conservative MPs who made extraordinarily good speeches and arguments for rejecting ID cards. I simply cannot understand how, with the Second Reading of the Bill perhaps a couple of weeks away, Her Majesty's so-called official Opposition cannot make up their mind what to do on this key issue. If they had the courage to come off the fence and join the Liberal Democrats and, I hope, many on the Labour Back Benches who share our view, we could defeat the ID card scheme. What a prize that would be, but the official Opposition do not want to share in that. I cannot understand that.

I shall now give the reasons why we will continue to object to the scheme. We are not convinced at all on the subject of costs. I asked the Home Secretary if he could tell us what the costs will be, but he cannot. How on earth could we back a scheme with a blank cheque? We know that the costs are likely to rise as more details, time and complexities are added to the scheme.

We do not believe that the idea that a piece of plastic could save the country from a terrorist attack is a sound argument—I note with interest that the Government talk about that a lot less. I am not convinced that a serious suicide bomber would be deterred by a piece of plastic. Sadly, we know that in New York and Madrid it was not effective and did not help protect national security.

I remain doubtful about whether the biometrics can work. Studies have emerged saying that there is a 1 or 2 per cent. error rate in some of the biometrics. A 1 per cent. error rate in a population of 50 million would mean that far too many people would be affected by a mistake or an error in their biometrics. They are not effective, and the failure rate is too high. I am not convinced that the database will work effectively or convinced about the protections that could be put in place on the database.

I am also not convinced by the argument that we will start with a voluntary scheme and move to a compulsory one, and that decisions about whether someone must have an ID card will, in the first place, be linked to whether they have to renew their passport. That could lead to the ridiculous situation that some of my Liberal Democrat colleagues might have to get an ID card because their passport is renewed, but I would not until 2012 because my passport does not need renewing until then. A two-tier society would be created with some people carrying ID cards because their passport is up for renewal and some not. What purpose and use can that be for any organisation in protecting anything? Someone could turn around and say that they do not need an ID card because their passport is not up for renewal. The proposed system is neither one thing nor the other, and the Government must make up their mind.

As for the claim that the scheme will tackle benefit fraud in this country, the Home Secretary knows that the vast majority of benefit fraud is not caused by people pretending to be someone else, but by overclaiming, so the scheme would not help. Another argument put forward by the Government relates to illegal working. We all want to tackle illegal working, but systems are already in place to do so. Are the police actually carrying out those prosecutions? No. Do we believe that gangmasters and individuals who bring in illegal workers would pay a blind bit of notice to whether they have an ID card? Of course not; it is an undercover market, and ID cards would not help tackle it.

Our final objection is the kind of culture and climate that the scheme would create. If I have to collect benefits, see my doctor, go into a post office, or access health services at an accident and emergency department, do I want someone to check who I am through my biometrics, fingerprints or a facial scan? Do I want to have to go to a centre, perhaps 100 miles away, to have all that data registered? Do I want to have to go and put my eye against an iris-scanner in my GP's surgery to enable me to use the public services that I can now use any day of the week without people asking me to do such things? That is not the kind of society that I want to live in. I am therefore proud that the Liberal Democrats have made their minds up to oppose and, I hope, defeat the identity cards Bill.

I welcome the Government's proposals in the Queen's Speech on immigration, because a points scheme represents a positive step forward. At last, the Government are going to come out fighting on this issue and to make the economic case for immigration. We argued during the election campaign that we should have a quota linked to an independent economic assessment of how many jobs were needed in this country, so that we could link jobs with economic migrants. The Liberal Democrats are proud to welcome, and celebrate the role played by, economic migrants. If the Government's intention is to do the same, through the points scheme, and to make that economic case, they will have our support.

The Government will also have our support in rejecting the Conservative proposals for a quota on genuine asylum seekers. We reject that proposal; there is no way in which I—or, I hope, the Home Secretary—could ever turn away a genuine refugee from this country, saying, "I'm terribly sorry, we're full. We've used up our quota. Come back next year and we'll see if there's space for you then." No way. We will not go down that route.

The Government have proposed various measures to deal with violent crime, on which there is a compelling need for new thinking. There is no point in getting into an argument about whether the statistics are going up or down in different parts of the country. If someone has been the victim of a crime, the only statistic relevant to them is 100 per cent. They do not want to hear politicians arguing about whether crime levels are slightly up or down. We need to tackle the problem of yob culture. Anyone who saw what happened in that graveyard in Bolton at the weekend will be disgusted at the way in which the graves were smashed up. We have seen far too many such images, and we know from our own constituencies that such activity presents a real problem.

The starting point is, of course, to ensure that we have proper policing, and I welcome the Home Secretary's speech to the Police Federation in Manchester last week, in which he acknowledged that more needed to be done to ensure that our police were out on the streets rather than filling in forms. I hope that our police will also be given the technology that could revolutionise their work methods, and that they will be able to get out on the streets with that technology rather than having to spend time filling in forms.

Of course, the solution goes wider than that. I agree that we must tackle the problem of reoffending. The Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety, the right hon. Member for Salford (Hazel Blears)—whom I congratulate on becoming a Privy Councillor—has been talking about that over the past few weeks. I am not going to get into a discussion about orange, red or blue clothing, but she has a point about tackling reoffending. She also has a point when she says that, when we consider alternatives to prison, the public must be able to see that proper community justice is delivered. I have sympathy with the arguments on badging, because if we can persuade the public that this is a tough, effective, alternative measure, that has to be the way forward.

Mr. Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Would the hon. Gentleman support any future antisocial behaviour legislation that would undermine some of the problems that he has described?

Mr. Oaten: Any effective antisocial behaviour measures would get our support, but we will not support the sticking-plaster approach, or measures that simply move a problem around from one estate to another, for example. I am interested in using antisocial behaviour orders as a punishment, but also in matching that with measures that effectively tackle the long-term problems. After all, it was the hon. Gentleman's Government who said that they wanted to be tough on crime—as represented by antisocial behaviour orders—and on the causes of crime. ASBOs do not necessarily address that second aspect.

On community service, I believe that we could go further in engaging communities. We have argued for the establishment of community justice panels, which would get the community involved in setting the sentences for low-order crime. That would probably be more effective than badging people, because it would ensure that members of a community felt a sense of ownership and justice in relation to what happened in their area.

We shall support the Government's suggestions on knife crime. I asked the Home Secretary earlier, during Home Office questions, whether he would consider linking the maximum sentence for a knife crime to that for a gun crime, and I was grateful to him for saying that he would look into the matter. People who commit crimes with either weapon can kill, and it should at least be possible for a court and a judge to set similar sentences for those crimes. Further steps need to be taken in that respect.

I have some concerns about issues relating to the age of 18 and legal responsibility, but that is part of a wider debate that we must have about what responsibilities kick in between 16, 17 and 18. A married couple will no longer be able to put a knife on their wedding list if they get married at 17. We need to consider such issues, but I am sympathetic to the Home Secretary's position.

We should also consider the problem of purchasing knives on the internet. My researchers did some cruising on the internet this morning—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] They did so legally, I might add, and they are all older than 18. They found for sale a "Red Dragon" Samurai sword, a genuine Gurkha working knife, a "Rambo" survival knife and a "Tanto" hunting knife. The list goes on, and it conjures up appalling images. We need to tackle that problem.

Drinking is one of the causes of such crimes, so we obviously welcome the announcement from the Beer and Pub Association this morning that it will do away with the happy hour. That is one step in the right direction, but that concession covers only 50 per cent. of clubs and pubs. I hope that the Home Secretary will use the BPA decision as a means of leverage on some of the other operators, rather than those operators using it as an opportunity for commercial gain, because 50 per cent. of the marketplace has got rid of the happy hour. The real danger is that the less scrupulous, who are not part of the association, will see it as an opportunity to get more customers in for the happy hour. The Government need to act urgently.

I want to conclude with some personal remarks and thoughts, not party policy, about the respect agenda in this country. The Government are absolutely right to tackle the issue of respect, which is key, and which came up time and again on the doorstep. That is not a mystery to any of us, as we have known for many years that people are concerned about how we tackle it. Can politicians micro-manage the issue, however? By banning hoodies in town centres, for example, can we alter the lack of respect? I am doubtful about that, but we have a responsibility to try to do something about it.

I have two thoughts on the matter. The first is about community and the breakdown of community and of neighbourhoods. Why is there a sense of community in the village in which I live, and—thank goodness—little crime, yob culture or whatever one wants to call it? What can we do to try to recreate a sense of community in which people talk to each other and neighbours communicate with each other? We now have a climate in which neighbours put up fences of leylandii to try to avoid talking to each other. Parents do not talk to each other about how they bring up their children. We often seem to want to exclude others, and we seem very isolated.

My second thought relates to the campaign being run at the moment by the *Daily Express* to try to bring back some form of national volunteering. There may be something in that, and to be blunt, it is risky for politicians to talk about it. We need to explore this agenda, however. No one wants to return to national service, but should we not examine the idea of youngsters once again giving something to society and working together?

Mr. Andrew Turner: I have been thinking of this intervention for some time in view of what the hon. Gentleman has been saying. Is it not important to recognise that many thousands and millions of young people do not conform to the demonisation of them by some right hon. and hon. Members? Many thousands and millions of young people do volunteer, but do not have to be corralled into doing so by some kind of national scheme.

Mr. Oaten: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the vast majority of youngsters do not deserve the "hoodie yob" tag. It is on their behalf that we must tackle those who are a problem, however. That does not

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mean that we should ignore or fail to address some of the issues. Many young people do volunteer, but the question is: why do others not do so? Let us be blunt: many children have an opportunity to take part in a gap year, live away from home, experience a different area, and move away from the estate or the community in which they have been brought up. We should examine ways in which we can expand that opportunity, so that every youngster, at some point in their life, after schooling, has the opportunity to get away from home, meet different youngsters and peer groups, and perhaps take part in a six-month programme of activity. Although it may be the bigger picture debate, we need to examine the respect agenda.

When the Government put forward serious suggestions to try to tackle crime in this country, they will have our support. When they put forward measures that undermine the principles of justice and civil liberty, however, I guarantee that this party—because no other party will do it—will defend those important principles.

5.29 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am most grateful to be called to give my maiden speech in today's debate.

I am only the second Member to represent the Denton and Reddish constituency, which, being only 22 years old, is still a relatively new political creation. The previous Member, Andrew Bennett, had represented both this seat and, before that, the former constituency of Stockport, North continuously since 1974. I am privileged to have known and worked alongside Andrew Bennett for a number of years, and I consider him not just my predecessor but a real friend and comrade. He was a first-class constituency Member of Parliament for both Stockport, North and Denton and Reddish, and will certainly be a hard act to follow. Indeed, it was a testament to his hard work in the constituency that at every election he fought in Denton and Reddish there was a swing away from the Conservatives towards Labour. That is some political achievement.

With Andrew Bennett, we always knew where he stood. I did not always agree with Andrew's stances, but he had—sometimes to the dismay of the Whips Office—strong views, and he stuck to them. In over 30 years, he never swayed from his beliefs. He is a real man of principle.

In Parliament, Andrew served in the 1980s as a Front-Bench Opposition spokesperson on education. More recently, he served as co-Chair of, first, the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, and then the Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions—a post that he happily shared with my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). Most recently, he chaired the Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. He was extremely well versed in the rules and procedures of the House. He was a true parliamentarian. He was also—in fact, he still is—a keen rambler, and I know how proud he was that this Labour Government had finally secured key legislation granting the right to roam throughout our countryside.

I shall also briefly pay tribute to another former Member. Before 1983, much of what is now Denton and Reddish constituted the main part of the Manchester, Gorton constituency. Until 1983 the MP for that constituency was Ken Marks. Although, sadly, he is no longer with us, Ken is still held in very high esteem throughout much of Denton and Audenshaw.

Before entering Parliament in a hotly contested by-election in 1967, Ken served for many years as a local councillor for the Denton West ward on Denton urban district council. For the past nine years I too have served as a Labour councillor for the Denton West ward, on Tameside metropolitan borough council, and I am very privileged to have entered the House by following in Ken Marks's footsteps.

Let me explain to Members who are unfamiliar with the constituency that Denton and Reddish is in eastern Greater Manchester. It straddles the metropolitan boroughs of Tameside and Stockport, and contains not just the towns of Denton and Reddish but the strong communities of Audenshaw, Dukinfield, Haughton Green, Heaton Norris, Heaton Chapel and Lancashire Hill. The constituency nestles firmly between the Pennines and the bustle of the city of Manchester.

A 10-minute drive in one direction takes one to all the delights of the city centre, and another in the opposite direction leads straight into the Peak District national park. Although mine is an urban seat, we are blessed with the Tame Valley, a linear country park. It runs throughout the constituency, following the River Tame, one of the two tributaries of the River Mersey.

Denton and Stockport were once the main centres of hat manufacture in the United Kingdom. Sadly, hatting has all but died, but the beaver is still Denton's mascot, and of course we still have three pubs called the Jolly Hatter. I am not entirely certain whether it was the effect of the mercury or the beer that made them all so jolly.

Thanks to this Labour Government, the constituency that I have inherited is a far better place than it was in 1983, when my predecessor was first elected for the seat. Back then the area was blighted by poor housing, high unemployment and declining industries. Now, thanks to massive investment, that is beginning to change. Unemployment, at 1.9 per cent., is below both the national and the regional average, and the new deal has given real hope to hundreds of young people. Major new shopping developments have opened in Denton town centre, and the completion of the M60 Manchester orbital has brought massive inward investment into both Tameside and Stockport.

Unfortunately, some of the more inferior constituency profiles have failed to catch up with the dramatic changes that have taken place under Labour—so much so that my Tory opponent referred to poor housing, high unemployment and declining industries throughout his campaign. Thankfully, that was not a picture that my electorate recognised on 5 May.

It is the issue of communities that we are here to debate today, and I welcome the Government's crime and disorder measures in full. However, I particularly want to focus on housing, a subject to which both Andrew Bennett and Ken Marks referred in their maiden speeches. Again, a lot has changed since Andrew Bennett raised that issue on 12 March 1974. Reddish in particular has benefited from a 10-year housing renewal

programme, which has greatly improved many of the older terraced houses in the area. There has been a fantastic conversion of the listed Houldsworth mill in Reddish, and now other fine mills in the town are set to be regenerated into smart new apartments. In the Tameside part of the constituency, major investment is being put into social housing through stock transfer, although the criticism has been that for many tenants, the pace of change has been slower than they expected. Nevertheless, the decent homes standard will be met by New Charter Housing, and its investment programme has made a big difference to the areas that have benefited so far.

House prices throughout Denton and Reddish have rocketed under this Government. Indeed, Dukinfield was highlighted as a "property hot spot" in a recent Halifax survey published in *The Times*. Although that is good news for those with a foot on the property ladder, it is starting to have a major impact on first-time buyers. I fully welcome the proposals outlined over the weekend by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to extend shared equity. That will have a positive impact in my constituency, and I look forward to supporting the measures when they come before us.

Despite those positives, there are still some areas for concern. First, there is the increasing problem of absentee private landlords. There is an issue, particularly with older terraced property being snapped up as an investment to be rented out privately, and either tenants are unable to get in touch with their landlord to get repairs done, or neighbouring residents are unable to contact the landlord to report antisocial behaviour, which is a growing problem.

The other issue is the need to stop market failure spreading out of east Manchester. That has been a real issue over the past decade throughout much of eastern Manchester. The Government are to be congratulated on their efforts to stabilise the situation there with an injection of massive investment through the regeneration company New East Manchester. The problem for my constituency is that it falls just outside that regeneration area. The risk is that while the market is stabilised—and, I hope, the trend reversed—within east Manchester, things will start to slip on the fringes of the constituency, where similar housing exists but without the benefits extended to the regeneration areas adjacent.

Those are some of the issues that I wish to pursue in Parliament. I also wish to return to one other piece of Ken Marks's unfinished business—the issue of ground rents and chief rents. My constituency is one of only a handful of areas where chief rents are legally established. Despite the fact that people are freeholders, someone else can charge an annual fee on their land. I have to say, through my experience as a councillor, that some of the tactics employed by some of the rent charge companies leave a lot to be desired. However, thanks to Ken Marks, people can buy out their chief rents by applying to the Government office. Unfortunately, the same is not true for those subject to ground rents. They are still subject to some of the bad tactics—some would go as far as calling them scams— employed by the rent charge companies. I want the rules to be toughened up, so that those bad practices are stopped.

I said on election night that it was an honour and a privilege to represent in Parliament the area where I have always lived, where I grew up, went to school and am now bringing up my own family. I genuinely believe that, and restate my pledge to do my very best for all the communities of Denton and Reddish.

5.39 pm

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I start by paying tribute to the eloquence and enthusiasm with which the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) made his first address to the House. I just hope that I can in some way match those assets.

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House for the first time, but I do so with some trepidation, because I am seeking to fill the shoes of some very eminent people who have represented Newbury in the recent past. Many Members of this House will remember Sir Michael McNair-Wilson, who was for two decades the Member of Parliament for Newbury. He was followed all too briefly by Judith Chaplin, who tragically died 11 months after entering the House.

It has taken me a long time to get here. I was first selected for the Newbury constituency 11 years ago, and one reason why it has taken me so long is my immediate predecessor, David Rendel. When he won the Newbury by-election, the information about his majority was passed to his party leader, who said, "That can't be the majority; that must be the total vote." David Rendel remained an active and committed Member of Parliament for 12 years, and it is a great privilege to follow him. I pay particular tribute to his stalwart support for the Newbury bypass, which was a massive issue in West Berkshire, as many Members will remember. He led that debate locally with great courage, and I pay tribute to him for that.

Like the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, I consider it a great privilege to represent the constituency in which I was born, raised and educated, and where I live with my family today. It is a very beautiful part of England. It starts just to the west of Reading, goes all the way to the Wiltshire border and includes in its landscape the Berkshire downs, many beautiful villages and the Lambourn valley. Given the presence in my constituency of the Lambourn valley and the Newbury racecourse, I look forward to being an active supporter of racing and the racing industry in this House.

My constituency also includes the vibrant towns of Thatcham, Hungerford and Newbury itself. Part of the fascination of the area is that close to such beautiful landscape and long-established industries as racing and agriculture, one finds cutting-edge technology companies such as Vodafone. Some 20 years ago, Vodafone was started by a handful of employees in one office in Newbury; now, more than 5,000 employees work at its headquarters and in the immediate vicinity of Newbury. It is a model of corporate responsibility, and there is scarcely a school or voluntary body that has not received substantial funding from the Vodafone Group Foundation in recent years.

We are extremely proud of our new hospital in West Berkshire, which was opened last year. It was opened thanks to the hard work of many local people—[HON MEMBERS: "Thanks to a Labour Government."] I am coming to that. The hospital was opened thanks also to a legacy from a generous local person. The private

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finance initiative process was progressed under the previous Conservative Government, the hospital was built under the Labour Government, and the credit for it was taken by the Liberal Democrats. So we all feel a sense of ownership.

West Berkshire is no stranger to protest. In 1868 there was an election in which a previous Richard Benyon was elected for the constituency, and Newbury assizes were filled for many weeks afterwards with many cases of riotous assembly. I am glad to say that elections these days are much more orderly and good natured. However, in my constituency we have the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, and Greenham Common, both of which have excited certain protest activities in recent years.

The Atomic Weapons Establishment is close to where I live, and I do not subscribe to the hysteria with which some people regard it. It is a good, conscientious local employer. It is conscious of the safety of local employees and of local people, and it is a centre of excellence for science and engineering. I commend it on the decommissioning work that it has done throughout the world.

Greenham Common is a living, breathing example of the peace dividend. In the 1980s it was a scene of mass protests, but more people work at the base now than worked there at the height of the missile deployment. The open area has reverted to public access, and all profits from the rentals are ploughed into the local community.

The sense of security, or insecurity, that people feel stems, to a great extent, from the sort of community in which they live. Communities both large and small need to have a sense of worth. There seems to be a relentless centralisation of resources and vital facilities that sucks the lifeblood out of communities. The loss of village shops and post offices, the closure of rural schools and churches and the conversion of pubs to housing have all been debated at length, but it is not just in rural communities where that is a feature.

In my constituency, towns have lost police stations and ambulance stations. Last year we suffered the great and severe loss of a number of suburban post offices. Each time a community loses one of these entities, its sense of self-worth is diminished. Nothing is achieved by standing by and watching as this centralisation continues. We have to look forward to see the risks that will come if this scourge continues, and what we can do to prevent it.

My local magistrates bench sits just in Newbury, but many years ago it sat in Hungerford and Lambourn. Perhaps for very good reasons, it withdrew to Newbury. I am convinced that in future somebody could make a good case for centralising all magistrates services to a larger town such as Reading. I have nothing against Reading, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson) would have words to say if I did. However, it is absolutely crazy to persist with this intense centralisation.

We must protect individuals who will be affected. Where would such a move leave an elderly person who has been a victim of crime and has to travel many miles to give evidence in court in a city or town with which he or she is not familiar? We have to embrace technology and applaud organisations such as Thames Valley police, which recently opened a police presence in a village that lost its police station 10 years ago, thereby adding to the sense of worth of that community.

That is the point. Too often the centralisation of services is done for the convenience of organisations rather than for the communities or individuals that they serve. We forget that the concept of best value means more than financial prudence; it must encompass a human element. Enhancing the sense of a community's worth by retaining or reinforcing services and pushing services back into it is a concept that will feed into any current zeitgeist, such as the respect agenda.

I look forward to debating these issues, and to trying to protect the communities of West Berkshire, for many years to come in this House.

5.48 pm

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West and Royton) (Lab): I start with a real tribute to the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). Making a maiden speech in the House of Commons is, as we all remember, never easy, but they accomplished it with a degree of self-confidence, and with some contentiousness, which I am glad to see is beginning to break into maiden speeches. They spoke also with a certain wry amusement, which means that they will be listened to with great attention in future. I am sure that we all wish them well.

Obviously a good deal of the Queen's Speech is positive and constructive, and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) had the grace to recognise that at the start of his speech. However, I found much of the rest of his speech disappointing. He concentrated, understandably, on the difficult issue of drug and alcohol-related crime and the figures, which are contentious. But he did not say that this was a problem that exists in almost all western societies and, although I understand the difficulties, he was not able to come forward with his own alternative, positive and better proposals.

The right hon. Gentleman moved on to anti-terrorism, which is another extraordinarily difficult subject, as he recognised in a speech at the end of the last Parliament. Again, however, he did not come forward with proposals on how to reconcile individual civil liberties with the overriding need to protect the state, which is the central issue.

David Davis: Perhaps I can help the right hon. Gentleman. If it is just one person—as it appears to be—who is to be under a control order, that is when surveillance, which is what we talked about in the last Session, would come into its own. We do not need control orders in those circumstances.

Mr. Meacher: I accept that, and shall come on to that subject.

The generality of the Queen's Speech has much in it on which we would all agree, but I find it a little piecemeal. It is rather a patch-and-mend programme over a wide area of policy, instead of possessing a commanding theme or embracing a clear vision of

society. Another concern is that in the absence of such a vision, there is a complete omission of many proposals that would address some of the fundamental problem areas in society. Indeed, some of the content of the Queen's Speech might even make those areas worse.

My first point is about accountability, which I realise is contentious. It was raised at the start of the election campaign, but not pursued. It is not a dry constitutional issue, because it underpins all the other decisions that are taken across the board. We cannot go on repeating episodes such as what happened with tuition fees, foundation hospitals, genetically modified foods and control orders, on which the Government either did not consult or, having consulted, proceeded to take the decisions that they intended to take all along. We cannot again be taken to war on the basis of a vote the day before a war starts, and be denied any debate on it and its aftermath for 15 months, and then given only an Adjournment debate, without any substantive motion or a vote. All that ground is well known, and we need a new set of agreed procedures in the House to make such arrangements impossible.

I hasten to say that in this Parliament, with its much smaller majority, none of us is seeking confrontation, but that depends on a more responsive leadership. We need a new style—more collegiate and genuinely consultative. Frankly, however, that will not happen unless Parliament bestirs itself. We need a new cross-party parliamentary commission to examine every aspect of parliamentary accountability and make recommendations. Its remit should include the role and powers of Parliament in holding Ministers to account, in choosing membership of Select Committees, in appointing specialist committees of inquiry, and in tabling motions for debate and vote on the Floor of the House, as well as completing reform of the House of Lords. Those are all fundamental if Parliament is to regain its rightful place in the power structure of this country.

My second point is that if the Government are to construct, as I hope they will, a new, modern and dominant social democratic consensus as their memorial, they will have to do a great deal more about inequality. It is true that child poverty has been reduced, that pensioner benefits have been significantly increased and that working families are better off as a result of the working families tax credit. All that has been made possible by the Chancellor's sound management of the economy. However, it is also true that inequality has sharply increased. It is unacceptable that one fifth of our population is below the poverty line when hundreds at the other end of the spectrum take home several million pounds a year. In particular, the national minimum wage is set much too low, and the flagrant tax-avoidance devices of stock options, bonuses and so-called fringe benefits need to be dealt with.

Ms Abbott: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one reason why so many of our traditional white working-class voters are turning to the British National party in protest is the perception—false, in many ways—that the Government have focused on the concerns of middle England to the exclusion of the material economic concerns of the core Labour vote?

Mr. Meacher: That is an important point. I am sure my hon. Friend would agree that the Government—and the Chancellor in particular—have improved the quality of life and the income of hard-working families, that there has been a substantial uplift, and that poverty has been reduced. That is certainly true, but my objection is that inequality has continued to increase because the gap between the poor—although they are fewer in number and they have a bit more—and the rich is still being increased by the enormous and soaring escalation of incomes at the top. Both problems need to be addressed. One reason why there has been a switch to the BNP is because working-class families feel that they are not getting enough, or a fair deal in society. Things have improved, but not enough.

Thirdly, there is, inevitably, a balance to be struck between protecting civil liberties and safeguarding the security of the state, which has been mentioned. However, since 9/11, that balance has been pulled in an uncomfortably authoritarian direction. Quite apart from the removal of the right to silence and restrictions on jury trials, the Government seem—I hope that I am wrong, but this is what is reported—to be returning to Algeria those acquitted after the Bourgass trial, including one person who had been granted asylum. They are almost certain to face torture, and may face death, which is reminiscent of the awful American practice of "rendition", I think it is called—or outsourcing torture.

In the case of the much-trumpeted ricin plot of January 2003, it now emerges that there was no ricin and no plot, only a convenient pretext to bang the anti-terrorist drum just before the Iraq war, and perhaps even to claim the need for ID cards. Above all, however, in the case of control orders, which the Government are obliged to reconsider, there is a much better way of reconciling individual rights with state security.

I propose that where terrorism, or at least acts preparatory to terrorism, are alleged, all the evidence relevant to the case should be made available to the suspect unless the judge is convinced—on the basis of advice from the security services or the Home Secretary, and on proper grounds of national security—that it cannot safely be made available. That compromise, for which, of course, there is already an effective precedent in the form of public interest immunity orders, would protect human rights and ought to be acceptable to the Home Office. I hope that the Government will reconsider that later in the year.

My fourth concern is how the so-called public services reform will be pursued. All too often that is a euphemism for more privatisation, deregulation and outsourcing. It is worrying that the first speech of the Secretary of State for Health emphasised strongly the transfer of 10 to 15 per cent. of operations to the private sector, when the consequences of that are so clear: it means skimming off the most lucrative procedures while leaving the more difficult and expensive cases to the national health service, and it means draining off doctors and resources from the NHS—not for a saving, which we could understand, but at greater cost.

That policy agenda is not—I repeat not—about choice when, in the case of housing policy, tenants who choose the fourth option, to stay with their own local authority, are denied that choice, and when, in the case of transport policy, the majority who want rail franchises to be transferred to the public sector are denied that choice.

[Mr. Meacher]

Lastly, we need to learn the real lesson of Iraq: we have become far too close to the US line. We need a foreign policy bottom line driven by our fundamental British interests and by our commitment to the United Nations, and not by US interests. As proof of that, we need an early statement from the Prime Minister that under no circumstances will we give support, even indirectly, to any military attack on Iran, whatever the Americans may do. I hope that all those points will be taken.

6.1 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): As an ardent campaigner for decision making to remain in this House, I am delighted to address the House today. I must thank the retiring Member for Windsor for his continuous hard work over many years. It is thanks to him that the doors of the Edward VII hospital remain open; it is thanks to him that the doors of the Helena Day ward remain open. I must also thank him for his good work with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and its continued work in Belarus and Tibet.

I must also thank the members of the Windsor Conservative association, who selected and supported me more than 19 months ago. It really means something to me that they have stuck with me the whole way through the hard work of getting elected. Of course, I must thank the residents of Windsor for the warm welcome that I received on 35,000 doorsteps. I recognise that many of them will have broken with former allegiances to deliver the result that delivers me here today.

I would like to tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about the wonderful constituency that I represent. It has leafy hills and dales; it has great parks and lakes. It is beautiful and attractive, as are the people. I recall one particular doorstep on which I was campaigning early one morning. I knocked on the door and a beautiful young lady answered. She seemed stunned to see me, and I was certainly stunned, but also delighted, to see her—thinking that I was her boyfriend, she had come to the door completely naked. I have lost my train of thought now.

We have some wonderful schools in the constituency. One near Slough, with which many Members will be familiar, is particularly notable. We also have wonderful historic buildings. With the award given to the Fat Duck a few weeks ago it is now accepted the world over that we have the finest dining in the entire world. We benefit from internationally renowned race courses, and we have a strong military presence, with the Household Cavalry and the Blues and Royals. We have one of the finest, grandest and most popular tourist attractions in the whole world—a symbol of our national historic heritage. I refer of course to Legoland. We also have one or two notable residents, of whom I am sure we are all aware.

We face some challenges, too. The character of our area, our community and our neighbourhoods is being ruined by insensitive high-density development. That is placing pressure on our roads, creating queues at our GPs' surgeries and causing stress to parents who cannot find a place for their children in the local schools. We have also had the blight of flooding in recent years. In areas such as Horton, Wraysbury, Old Windsor and Datchet, the risks caused by the inadequate measures on the Jubilee river still exist. In other parts of the constituency, the challenge and threat of increasing aircraft noise remain. We have a noisy neighbour in Heathrow, which not only provides employment but brings stresses and strains with the continued noise and pollution that is created. We have some challenges, and we must rise to meet them.

Like many Members, I come from a fairly ordinary background. When one comes from an ordinary background, one is determined to make something of oneself. I worked hard at school, I made it to grammar school and then on to university. I have worked hard in business for many years. I am delighted that today, the organisations that I helped to start provide incomes and livelihoods for about 300 people and their families. I will continue to work hard here in Parliament, to take action on the issues that matter to us all.

When I was being lovingly dragged up in south-east London, a thought struck me. My friends, my family and the people with whom I have worked over the years all seem to be happier when they are making decisions for themselves—when they have control of their own lives. One of the biggest causes of stress in Britain today is a feeling that one's own life is out of one's control. With my hon. Friends, I am determined that people should regain a sense of control over their lives. We have had a lot of talk today about civil liberties, and I am determined that we shall continue that push towards civil liberties, towards a country free from unnecessary interference from state and government.

Despite the sleep deprivation during the campaign and for the first couple of weeks here in Parliament, I am thrilled, delighted, excited and elated to be here, but I am also conscious of the onerous responsibility that we bear as Members. The House has my commitment that I will take action; I will not only campaign for the residents of Windsor but take action on the things that matter to us all. In the years to come, I want all of us to feel a sense of control over our lives, a sense of self-confidence in who we are and, as far as is possible in a civilised society, a sense of freedom to enjoy our lives in the way that we choose. Above all, I want all British citizens to rediscover a sense of pride in being British. I say without hesitation or hindrance that I am proud to be British. I am proud to play a small role in this debate, and I am proud that under your watchful eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will play a small role in the future of our great nation.

6.7 pm

Sarah McCarthy-Fry (Portsmouth, North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) and for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) on the eloquence of their maiden speeches.

I have counted my predecessor, Syd Rapson, as one of my friends for many years, since we served together on Portsmouth city council. Syd is a classic example of a local boy made good. Prior to serving as Portsmouth,

North's MP, one of his proudest achievements was serving as lord mayor of the city. He was very proud of his trade union and working class roots, and always remained loyal to the Labour party. Whenever he was asked whether he was old Labour or new Labour, he always replied, "I'm recycled Labour."

During his eight years as an MP for Portsmouth, North, Syd lived and worked among his constituents and was a champion for the hard-working families of the constituency. His experience as an aircraft fitter and a union convenor in the defence industry was invaluable in supporting the companies that maintain our ships in Portsmouth naval base. Nobody was more pleased than Syd when, in 2004, shipbuilding returned to Portsmouth after 37 years. His appointment as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the defence team enabled him to use his experience and expertise to good effect.

Like Syd, I have spent all my life living and working in Portsmouth and I also have a background of over 20 years working in manufacturing in the aerospace and defence sector. Over the centuries, Portsmouth has been at the forefront of defending our shores. It is the historical home of the Royal Navy and the sea continues to have a huge influence over the lives of its residents, whether through the microclimate that Portsmouth enjoys as a result of its proximity to the coast or through the economic benefits of being the trading gateway to Europe via our commercial ferry port.

Syd Rapson was not the first Labour MP for Portsmouth, North: that accolade goes to Donald Bruce, who took the seat in the first Labour landslide of 1945. Another of my distinguished predecessors, Frank Judd, now Lord Judd of Portsea, served Portsmouth between 1966 and 1979 and was Navy Minister in Harold Wilson's Government, thus cementing Portsmouth's link with maritime and defence matters in government. I spoke with Lord Judd during the election campaign. He wished me well and told me that I would be very fortunate to have the people of Portsmouth, North as my constituents, as they were some of the warmest and friendliest people he had ever met. I concur with his view.

Portsmouth people share a pride in our city and in our heritage, and we delight in sharing them with visitors. This year, we have a golden opportunity to share that heritage as part of the "Sea Britain" celebrations: 2005 is the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar, and Portsmouth, as the home of HMS Victory, will be centre stage. Since the reign of Edward III, British sovereigns have reviewed their fleet off Spithead off Portsmouth, and on 28 June an international fleet review will take place in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen and senior members of the royal family, continuing that 600-year-old tradition, but this time extending it into a modern symbol of international maritime friendship and co-operation. Ships from all corners of the globe will arrive in the Solent: naval ships from some 40 nations will join our Royal Navy, merchant vessels, tall ships and thousands of sailing craft of all shapes and sizes.

The fleet review will be followed by a return visit to Portsmouth for the international festival of the sea. Visitors will be able to climb aboard fascinating vessels from around the world and listen to sailors' real-life stories about life at sea. They will be able to step back in time to the sights and sounds of 200 years ago in the historic dockyard area and take part in interactive demonstrations and exhibitions showcasing our high-technology industries.

It is those industries that will be the key to the survival of manufacturing industry in Portsmouth. Many of the technology industries and engineering companies based in my constituency support the Navy or the defence industry in some way. My constituency office will be based in the Portsmouth Technopole, an innovation centre set up to maximise the formation and development of businesses with the potential for growth. I hope that my presence there will demonstrate my commitment to fostering entrepreneurship in Portsmouth and help the creation of local jobs.

I have been elected as a representative of both the Labour party and the Co-operative party, and I cannot let this occasion pass without reference to the co-operative movement. I welcome the Labour Government's support for mutuality and the recognition that co-operative enterprises have a strong role to play in regenerating communities and the local economy. It is through economic regeneration that we will be able to achieve our goals of sustained full employment and the eradication of child and pensioner poverty. When people are working and contributing to their community and young people have goals to which they aspire and good job prospects, they are much less likely to turn to crime.

When our visitors to the international festival of the sea stroll through the historic dockyard area and watch re-enactments of life in Nelson's time, they should not forget what a lawless place Portsmouth was in the early 19th century. Theft and muggings were rife and, if any hon. Members present have seen the famous Rowlandson engraving of "Point at Old Portsmouth", they will know that it depicts prime examples of 19th-century antisocial behaviour and binge drinking. Of course, people in those days did not have the sanctions of antisocial behaviour orders; on the contrary, for young men a more unwelcome consequence of a night on the tiles might be a visit from the press gangs that roamed the streets looking for naval recruits—and choice, I regret to say, was not a word in their vocabulary.

Portsmouth has come a long way since those days. Since 1997, we have seen real reductions in crime. We have record numbers of police officers in Portsmouth and in Paulsgrove and Wymering—parts of Portsmouth, North that are some of the most deprived areas in the country—we have seen the successful implementation of a community warden scheme. The wardens have made a difference to the local community, acting as the eyes and ears of the police and providing a visible, uniformed presence that has reassured local residents and made a real impact in terms of crime reduction.

The 21st century, however, has brought different kinds of threat to local neighbourhoods. We have to be aware of the very real threat of an indiscriminate terrorist attack and we also face the new and growing phenomenon of identity theft. That is why I welcome the proposals in the Queen's Speech to introduce legislation for a biometric identity card, a view that is shared by the overwhelming majority of my constituents. Law-abiding people should have nothing to fear from an identity card, and although we must always consider the

[Sarah McCarthy-Fry]

civil liberties aspects of such measures, there has to be a balance. My constituents have a right to feel that their Government are doing all in their power to protect them from modern-day threats.

My constituents also have the right to feel that their Government value their dreams and aspirations and are not prepared to write off whole communities, as happened in the '80s and early '90s, when the only future young people had to look forward to was a life on the dole. Portsmouth's young people now have a bright and vibrant future. More students than ever are going to university—no longer is it seen as something only for the wealthy. To those people who say that our 50 per cent. target is unrealistic, I reply, "It is just a start—why should we put a cap on the aspirations of our young people?" A secondary school in my constituency named after Admiral Lord Nelson has as its motto, "Dare to Dream, Aim to Achieve". Under successive Conservative Governments, most of the people in my constituency did not dare to dream, because the vast majority were bound to be disappointed. Thankfully, that has changed since 1997.

There was a man who was born in Portsmouth in 1912 just a few streets away from where I live now who did dare to dream and who was not disappointed. He became an MP for Cardiff and achieved the highest office in this country. I am, of course, talking about James Callaghan, who became Lord Callaghan of Cardiff and who was Prime Minister between 1976 and 1979.

Portsmouth is my home city and I am proud to have been elected to serve as its first woman MP. I hope that I can represent my city with the same dedication and commitment as my distinguished predecessors. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech, and I thank the hon. Members present for listening to me.

6.16 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is a great privilege and pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth, North (Sarah McCarthy-Fry), who made an excellent speech. She obviously knows a great deal about the history of her constituency. I am a sailing man myself and know what a thrill and pleasure it is to sail out of Portsmouth harbour, passing all that history. She mentioned the Spithead review: at the risk of injecting a tiny note of controversy, I have to say that it is a pity that our fleet on that occasion will be a little smaller than it was the last time. None the less, hers was an excellent speech on which I warmly congratulate her.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie). What a great pleasure and honour it is to be the first Conservative Member of Parliament to welcome him to the House. His speech was most moving. Having said that he came from an ordinary background, he expressed his great pride in this place, in our Britishness and in the jobs and the hope that he has given to those whom he has employed in the past. He also voiced his determination to proceed along the path of empowering ordinary people. His was a wonderful speech and we are grateful to him.

We also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon). He was a candidate in that constituency for 11 years and has finally made it to this House. I pay tribute to his predecessor, David Rendel, who was a colleague on the Public Accounts Committee, a superb member of that Committee, and highly regarded in the House. Finally, thanks are due to Syd Rapson, whom the hon. Member for Portsmouth, North mentioned. He was a well-liked and thoroughly decent man, whom we will miss greatly.

From new Labour, I turn to old Labour and the right hon. Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher)—if I can catch his attention. It was a pleasure to listen to his speech. He, a Labour MP, said that the Queen's Speech was piecemeal and that there was an "absence of vision"—I hope that I quote him accurately. That was to be the theme of my remarks, too. We all know that the Queen's Speech is not really the Queen's Speech, but the Government's. What is worse, however, is that this Queen's Speech does not even come from the Government themselves: it is merely an amalgam of what focus groups have told the Government would be popular. It lacks any sort of theme. I am sure that focus groups told the Government that the introduction of identity cards would be a popular measure. It was significant that the Home Secretary said that identity cards are supported by 80 per cent. of the population.

John Bercow: So what?

Mr. Leigh: Indeed.

If a serious discussion took place with the members of the focus groups, and if they were led through the issues as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), the shadow Home Secretary led us, and having been asked the pertinent questions, would 80 per cent. of people still support ID cards? However, that is not the point. If ID cards are wrong, we should oppose them.

I do not believe—here I pay a tribute to the Liberal party—that the Lib Dems were harmed by their opposition to ID cards. I was vociferous in my opposition to ID cards. I do not remember anyone in my constituency saying, "I'm not going to vote for you, Mr. Leigh, because you oppose ID cards." People want leadership. They want vision. They do not want government by focus groups. They are fed up with that. That is why we have so much apathy. That is why only 35 per cent. of people support the governing party. That is the lowest percentage supporting a Government party of any country in the world, or certainly in Europe.

I agree, of course, that the Conservative party did not do much better than that. We should have done much better. Perhaps we had also been listening too much to focus groups. Perhaps we should have had a bit more vision and determination and less of a managerial style. Perhaps we should have worked out what really we believe in—and we believe in the empowerment of ordinary people in choice, freedom, tradition and the nation, in all those finest Conservative values. If we have the determination and the guts to put those values forward, I believe that a much higher proportion of the population will support us.

Apart from the fact that there is no theme in the Queen's Speech, I am worried that the Government seem not to know in which direction they are heading. They realise that the public sector is not performing. For

their first eight years, they gave us a blizzard of targets. They seem now to be retreating from that approach, which is that the man in Whitehall knows best. They seem also to be at the stage in which the Conservative Government were between 1992 and 1997. They are starting to talk more about the internal market. They are creating city academies, which seem similar to the proposals that we were advancing in our last term of Government. Do they know to where they are coming?

I am worried also that the Government keep on making proposals that we spend hours debating but that have little coherence and there is no determination to implement them. The prime example is control orders. Were we not in the Chamber all night, or was it two nights and two days, discussing them? As my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary said, how many of those orders have been implemented?

We shall spend hours discussing religious hatred. I am dubious. I believe passionately that our country has been built on religious disputation on strong arguments. I do not believe that there is any call for such legislation. It is a cynical measure to try to secure votes in one section of a community. I believe that it will be rammed through the House by whipping, with little real support. Furthermore, I believe that, in the end, it will make virtually no difference to the present situation. Indeed, the legislation might cause more harm than good.

I would like some coherence in the Queen's Speech. I would like to see it based on sound principles of local action and local choice. A blizzard of Bills will come from the Home Office. I have a brief from the Law Society and I spent most of the morning trying to plough through it. I tried to understand the Bills that will be coming before us.

If we really want to get to grips with law and order, we should do what they are doing in New York. We should elect a police commissioner, a politician, and give him or her real control, free of the dictates of national Government. It is staggering what Mayor Giuliani achieved in the four years after his election in 1994. He cut the murder rate by 60 per cent. Robbery and burglary were reduced by 67 per cent. The number of police officers in New York increased from 29,000 to 40,000. That was local action. The mayor did not need Bills going through Parliament. He did not need 45 Bills in one Session. He was just a man who was put in control. That is what we need.

That is already happening in this country. There is Ray Mallon, a former police superintendent. He was elected by the good people of Middlesbrough as their mayor. He said that if he was put in charge of the police and did not cut crime by 20 per cent. in his time, he would resign. In fact, he cut crime by 27 per cent. He is now the elected mayor of Middlesbrough. He is coming forward with good old-fashioned Conservative policies.

Once, I stood as the Conservative parliamentary candidate in Middlesbrough. I lost by 13,000 votes. A Conservative has no more chance of being elected in Middlesbrough than does a Trotskyite in the Lincolnshire wolds. In Middlesbrough, however, a good conservative has been elected—that is with a small "c" because I do not know what his politics are, and that does not matter—who is coming through with good sound policies that the people want. These policies are based on zero tolerance and more police on the beat.

If we could only have the courage in the House not to bring forward year after year more and more criminal justice Bills and more and more interference but to introduce one simple measure to return real power—real empowerment—to local people, that would make the crucial difference. Indeed, that is all that we need to do.

The same applies in health and education. We must empower local people and allow them the freedom to send their children to the schools of their choice. We must allow heads to run schools and get back the school discipline and pride that we need. The same applies to the national health service. That is what the Conservative Queen's Speech would have been. Sadly, we did not have that opportunity, but the time will come. Increasingly, even the Government will realise that targeting has its limits. The man in Whitehall do not always know better. We can aim higher and achieve more, and the next Conservative Government will do precisely that.

6.26 pm

Mr. Sadiq Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech this evening, so saving me from the torture that we new Members have to go through as we attempt to catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair. It is easy to recognise us wherever we sit in the Chamber, clutching our speeches and looking pale and shifty and, as the evening goes on, looking paler and shiftier.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Portsmouth, North (Sarah McCarthy-Fry) and the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) and for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) on their excellent maiden speeches.

I feel both proud and humble to stand in my place today. I am proud that I can join this great debating Chamber and bring my constituency of Tooting to the attention of all hon. Members here. I feel humble to be speaking in a place that has been the home of great and famous orators down the decades and where legislation that has changed the face of Britain for the better has been passed. Much of that legislation has been passed by the Labour party, which has improved the lives of so many working people, including my own family.

I am Tooting, boy and man. I was born in the constituency and I have lived there all my life. I married a Tooting girl, Saadiya, and we are bringing up two beautiful daughters there, Anisah and Ammarah.

When I was selected as the Labour candidate for Tooting, I was able to realise an ambition of mine, which was to represent Tooting in Parliament. I am immensely proud to have been given that honour. I thank Tooting Labour party for its trust and hard work throughout the campaign. Its members will all go to socialist heaven. I hope that, over the coming weeks, months and years, I can repay the confidence that the Tooting community has shown in me.

In 1970, the year in which I was born, my predecessor, Tom Cox, came to Parliament. He represented Wandsworth, Central, which became Tooting after boundary changes. For 35 years, he was our Member of Parliament and we were all extremely proud of him and grateful for his unstinting work for the community. Of course, Tom was the only Member who represented me.

[Mr. Sadiq Khan]

We first met when I joined the Labour party as a 15-year-old. We became friends and have remained so ever since.

When I became a councillor, 11 years ago, it was always Tom whom I could talk to about how much the decisions of Parliament affected the people in my ward. I realise that many hon. Members knew Tom well. He was an assistant Government Whip from 1974 to 1977, when he was promoted to Whip and served until 1979. After his experiences, he views our majority of 66 as a luxury. I say that while looking towards the Whips.

Tom Cox served the people of Tooting with distinction in the casework that he undertook, in the Adjournment debates in which he took part, in the early-day motions that he signed, in the all-party groups of which he was a member and in much, much more.

I dug out Tom's maiden speech from July 1970. Its two main themes were education and industrial relations. For most of the first 27 years of Tom's stay in the House of Commons, his preoccupation was with education. I experienced the terrible problems to which underinvestment leads. I have vivid memories of old and tatty books, crumbling buildings, heating that did not work, which meant that we were left shivering through lessons in winter, outside toilets and teachers who were always involved in industrial action against the Government—I could go on.

I have been a governor at Fircroft primary school, which I attended, for the past 11 years, and my elder daughter started there in September. I can honestly tell the House that the changes made there since 1997 have been incredible. Gone are the outside toilets—in fact there is no school with outside toilets in Tooting—gone are the tatty and outdated books and gone are the days when the staff were in constant dispute with the Government. We have free nursery places for three and four-year-olds, and 6,200 children benefited from that in the past year alone. We also have 90 new teachers locally.

Although my secondary education at Ernest Bevin comprehensive was enjoyable, that school also had problems and there was always some sort of funding crisis. Just before Christmas 2004, it received more than £500,000 of investment, with even more improvements in the pipeline. I pay tribute to the hard-working teachers who, despite the problems to which I referred, encouraged me to go to university and become a lawyer. I hope that the hard-working teachers of today see this Government as being 100 per cent. committed on the side of state schools, all staff and all children.

The other main theme in Tom's maiden speech in 1970 was industrial relations. He talked about the need for trade unions and management to change their attitudes. Tom could have been writing a template for the sort of partnership that this Labour Government have helped to foster between businesses and trade unions and between the CBI and the TUC. As a committed trade unionist, I am terribly proud of the improvement to the work-family balance.

As hon. Members might have realised, I am immensely proud of Tooting. It is everything that is great about the new Britain in which I have been brought up. It is multi-ethnic, multi-religious and properly multicultural. Many different cultures live happily side by side and there is a true sense of tolerance. Geographically, Tooting is in south-west London but, metaphorically speaking, it is at the centre of the universe. Tooting is everything that is fantastic about our country and an excellent case study of what makes London the best city in the world.

I have visited several churches in my community over the years and the local Sikh Khalsa centre. We have four excellent mosques. We have the Hindu society on Garratt lane and a Tamil temple. We have a well-run Jewish residential home for the elderly and thriving amenity groups, mother and toddler groups and trade union activity. There are examples of Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Jews and those without faith living together, and not just being tolerant of each other's faiths and beliefs, but living in positive harmony. Community cohesion is not political jargon, but what Tooting is all about.

Three years ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (John Denham), who was then a Home Office Minister, came to Tooting to open the police contact centre at the Tooting Islamic centre. The local mosque and the police are thus working together with the community to provide a service to all. Anyone can come and receive crime prevention advice, have their property marked and meet the local police. The local community sees the police in a positive light and, just as importantly, the centre allows the police to meet the local community in a non-confrontational setting. It is a real example of a partnership and policing by consent. It also shows that the local Muslim community is not insular, but wants to give something back to the rest of the community by offering premises free of charge. That is an example, post 9/11, of the real Islam, where followers of that great faith believe in the well-being of the entire community, charity and partnership All the faiths are part of the wider community in Tooting, so each autumn and winter, the main roads around Tooting and Balham are lit up with the festival of lights celebrating the festivals of Christmas, Eid and Diwali.

It is important that all in our society feel that their Government are looking out for them. Unfortunately, an anomaly has meant that some of our community fail to get the full protection of our laws against hate crimes. Incitement to racial hatred has rightly been outlawed for some years now and it is a good thing that the courts have developed case law that protects Jews and Sikhs. Unfortunately, followers of multi-ethnic faiths, such as Muslims, Christians and Hindus, are not protected. I am afraid that the far right knows about that loophole and has been using it to incite hatred against Muslims, especially, over the past few years. I am pleased that we have a manifesto commitment—the Secretary of State referred to it earlier—to rectify that and give all our citizens equal protection. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber will consider the measure properly and not believe the nonsense that it will endanger the freedom of speech of comedians, theologians, priests and the like.

My father came to this country 40 years ago as an immigrant from Pakistan. Sadly, he passed away recently, but he would have been proud to have one of his children elected as the Member of Parliament for Tooting and to know that we had been accepted fully as

part of British society. My father taught me the sayings, or hadiths, of the Prophet Mohammed—peace be upon him. Mohammed taught that, if one sees something wrong, one has the duty to try to change it. If that is not possible, one should at least voice one's support for something that is good, or voice opposition to something that is wrong. If that is not possible, at the very least in one's heart one should know that something is wrong or right. I am proud to say that those values and that ethos are not shared only by Labour Members, because I am sure that we all share that sense of duty and service to our constituents.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and long may I catch the Deputy Speaker's eye. I thank the House for the courtesy that it has shown in helping me through the ordeal of making my maiden speech.

6.35 pm

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech and trial the fashion of orange suits for community service. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan) on his maiden speech. As he was speaking, I could hear my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne), who is also a new Member. My hon. Friend was at the same school, in the same year and in the same class as the hon. Gentleman and echoed everything that he said. I did not ask my hon. Friend whether the word "shifty" also applied.

Following the convention of the House, it is my pleasure to praise my predecessor. That is easy for me because my predecessor was Jenny Tonge, as all hon. Members know well. Jenny came to the House with a background as a doctor intending to make a career in women's health, and she certainly spoke on that matter with great frequency. In the end, given the vagaries of politics, she ended up as our spokesperson on international development. It was her work focusing on the humanitarian consequences of war and suffering, and talking about Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and Iraq, with which she made her reputation. Some people say that some of her remarks were divisive, and I did not always agree with what she said. However, I learned a lesson from Jenny that I intend to be a model for everything that I do in the House. She was not afraid to be independent or to speak her mind. I do not think that she ever understood what spin was about. In that way, even when people in my constituency disagreed with her, she earned respect. I found respect for her across all political parties in my constituency, and I see from the nods and expressions of hon. Members that she earned the same kind of respect in the House.

Jenny is of course going on to another place—she will speak for herself. I hope that she will not find it the prison that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) implied. He seemed to think that she might be caught up in some of the legal changes proposed on incitement to racial hatred. His words were an interesting warning that we should take to heart.

It is also my privilege to praise my constituency. Hon. Members will note the irony that Richmond Park is named after the one part of the constituency in which there are virtually no voters. However, the constituency captures both the old Richmond and part of the borough of Kingston—north Kingston, to be precise. For people in north Kingston, it is quite difficult to be part of the Richmond Park constituency. They try to understand why they have been included in the area because they have relatively little relationship with the other half. One of my tasks is thus to try to ensure that I represent both sides.

The areas have a common background due to their ties to royalty. North Kingston was the home of Saxon kings. It is also an environmental place and is the home of one of the biggest green fairs in the country. It has a growing attraction as a place for young families, especially, to live and make their futures. It has a strong history of good primary and secondary education. Richmond also has a royal connection. Queen Elizabeth I died in the old Richmond palace and King Charles II put the enclosures around Richmond park. There are royal ties to Kew gardens, which is not only one of the greatest botanical gardens in the country, but recognised globally as a world heritage site.

We are an area of villages, greens, commons and communities. The River Thames runs through the constituency. I recommend that anyone who has questions about the efficiency of government come to the Public Record Office at Kew and examine the Domesday Book, a cause of many visits to the area.

The description of Richmond Park as a leafy suburb is one that we listen to with a strained expression. Although the area includes many of significant wealth and prosperity, we also have people who live in deprived homes and neighbourhoods. We have behind some of our doors genteel poverty. It is easily overlooked, but it is extremely real to those who live there. We have many people who live on council estates and former council estates for whom wealth and prosperity are not the daily reality that they face. Because our area is so often dismissed as leafy and prosperous, their needs are often not recognised by central Government. It is to represent those people and their needs that I stand in the House today.

Like everywhere else, we have a certain amount of crime. We are two of the safest boroughs in London, but to people who are the victim of antisocial behaviour—in parts of our community that is not an infrequent experience—that matters just as much as if they were living in inner London or in a community up in the north-east. The attitude that the area is such a safe place has become an excuse that we must deal with. It means that we do not have policing that matches our needs, we have not been able to roll out the safer neighbourhood teams in the way that we need to, and we suffer particularly as people across London discover that we are an area with relatively little protection compared with our neighbours. Crime has begun to travel, as people come across the bridges into our communities because we are seen as a soft target. That must raise issues for me and other hon. Members.

There is a perennial issue for us, which Jenny mentioned in her maiden speech. Her predecessor, Jeremy Hanley, mentioned it in his maiden speech, and his predecessor, Sir Anthony Royle, also spoke about it. I refer to the blight on our community from the ever-expanding reality of Heathrow airport. A new lobby group has been formed to promote a third runway at Heathrow. On behalf of my community, I will fight that with every ounce of energy that I have. This is not a party political issue in my constituency. Every political

[Susan Kramer]

party shares those views, and so does every level of government because we recognise the needs of our residents for a decent quality of life and their right to a decent night's sleep and to be outside in their gardens from time to time without being drowned out by the noise of aircraft. We will go on fighting that battle. It is my ambition that my successor will never have to mention it in what I hope will be her maiden speech, because we will finally have dealt with it in this Parliament.

As I draw to a close, I express my thanks to the various old hands present in the Chamber, who have had the forbearance to sit and listen to maiden speeches. For us this is a gentle beginning; for them, it must be a desperate test of their patience. We all appreciate it.

The last issue that I addressed, Heathrow, picks up on a topic that I hope to follow in the House—the need to find a way to reconcile the importance of environment and sustainability with economic development, prosperity and growth. That subject, which needs to be dealt with in a serious way in legislation and in debate, is one that I particularly want to pursue. I say that on behalf of my residents. Like many others who have spoken today, I have the great pleasure to say that I am speaking to represent my neighbours and friends, the voluntary groups that I have worked with over many years and the businesses that I hope I have assisted, and to represent everybody of every political colour in my community. I thank the House and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make this maiden speech.

6.44 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): It has been a pleasure to sit in the Chamber this afternoon and listen to the speeches of recently elected hon. Members. That has been said before, but it is worth reiterating. It was not a test of patience at all; it has been extremely enjoyable. The speeches have been quite entertaining, and I wish that all those people who said to me on the doorstep, "Oh, politics is boring" could have been here to hear them. It has been a really enjoyable experience and I thank all the hon. Members who have spoken.

To return to the business of the House this afternoon, I welcome Government plans in the Gracious Speech to introduce an electoral administration Bill. Although the robust stance adopted by the returning officer in Bradford and West Yorkshire police went some considerable way to deterring the abuse of the electoral system in the general election, there can be no doubt that the current system, particularly with regard to voting by post, does not have the public confidence that our electoral system should have.

The events witnessed in Birmingham and now in Bradford, plus the hearsay evidence in my constituency, should never be allowed to occur again. The fundamental right to vote and to vote in secrecy cannot be taken for granted. For just one person to be denied that right, or to have it taken away on demand by another, makes a mockery of the system. A balance must be struck between the need to increase voter participation and the need for a secure system. The Electoral Commission's recommendations are helpful in this regard and I hope they will be incorporated in the Bill.

That said, perhaps we ought to consider a more fundamental review. The strength of any electoral system and of our democracy is only as good as the accuracy of the electoral register. Between 2001 and 2004, the number of people registered to vote in the Bradford district, of which my constituency forms one fifth, fell by 6.5 per cent. In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) the number fell by 11.3 per cent.

Why is this the case? Without a doubt, some of the reduction can be attributed to migration or changing demographic patterns, but the fact that registration went up in all five parliamentary seats in the Bradford district prior to the general election suggests that the numbers of potential electors were there, but the incentive to register was not. I am sure I was not alone in being surprised, when canvassing, to find houses, and sometimes large parts of a street, that were not registered.There are, of course, many reasons for non-registration. Some people do not want to be found. Whatever an individual's personal reasons for avoiding registration, it is a flaw in our system when registration is not encouraged or seen as a priority.

I have recently seen cases of minors being included on the electoral register or, more sinister, multiple registration at a two-bedroom house. As registration is not seen as a priority, such cases tend to go unnoticed or are not acted upon. On one occasion, someone whom I knew, owing to my constituency work, to have been refused leave to enter the UK was seen voting in a council election.

To base registration and, therefore, our whole electoral process, on good faith and honesty, though diligently upheld by the vast majority of the population, is outdated and being exposed to abuse. The unscrupulous minority, knowing that scrutiny of the register is not even on the radar of priorities, is able to commit electoral fraud with ease. The means to ensure the security of the register already exist. Some people believe that the payment of council tax will automatically lead to registration. Why not? The information is available and includes those in receipt of housing benefit, who often form the bulk of people who fail to register to vote. A simple exercise—a cross-reference between the electoral register and payment of council tax—would show a number of anomalies. Perhaps the over-use of the Data Protection Act 1998 prevents us from applying common sense in these matters.

Registration, supported by dates of birth or national insurance numbers, could be a welcome development, and that gives me yet another reason to support the introduction of identity cards. Presentation of an ID card at a polling station could give definite confirmation that the elector is who they say they are. Linking electoral registration to the holding of ID cards or passports would be a positive development and encourage a package of responsibility associated with citizenship.

Ensuring that our electoral system is fair, secure and encourages a high level of participation is just part of the battle. Encouragement to register, fairly and securely, must not be overlooked. It does not take rocket science, just a determination by local authorities, backed by adequate funding and imaginative but clear legislation.

6.50 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): We in Shrewsbury have a bit of a record already. We have a town cryer who is 7 ft 2 in tall, and at 6 ft 8½ in I am the tallest ever Member of Parliament, so I hope that that height will enable me to catch your eye in future debates, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In addition, my surname, which is of Polish origin, is very difficult to pronounce, but you did so splendidly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When I was in business, many of my colleagues said that I must be mad to think that I would get into the House of Commons with such a name, and that I should change it to an English name, but I refused to do that simply because I am very proud of my beloved grandfather, who is no longer alive. He was a great Polish patriot and he and many other Poles fought with the British during the war. Before he died, I promised him that I would never change my name. If I had done so, I would have sacrificed something special.

I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, the Labour Member of Parliament for Shrewsbury, then Liberal Democrat Member, then Labour, Paul Marsden. I gave a great deal of thought to what I could say about him. But I can genuinely say that I always found him to be extremely polite and friendly, and the handover of files has been done professionally. I wish him well in whatever he chooses to do next.

Shrewsbury is the county town of Shropshire. It is an extremely beautiful and historical town, with 600 listed buildings, a Norman abbey, a medieval castle and a Georgian crescent. We are also very much a town of flowers. Percy Thrower was the parks superintendent in Shrewsbury for 28 years, and he has certainly left an imprint on our town. We take the Britain in Bloom competition extremely seriously, and I pay tribute to all the members of the committee who work tirelessly to ensure that Shrewsbury puts on such a good display every year. We also have one of the most famous flower shows, the Shrewsbury flower show, which is renowned not just throughout the midlands, but throughout the country.

Shrewsbury is surrounded by some of the most beautiful countryside in England, with the Shropshire hills, and it is very agricultural. The West Mid show takes place in Shrewsbury every year and we also have the Minsterley show. We even have the Wroxeter vineyard, which produces lovely Shropshire wines, and I hope to convince the Catering Committee to stock some of them in the near future. Representing such a rural seat, farming is a key priority for me, and I shall be scrutinising the Government on their future agricultural plans.

The Royal Shrewsbury hospital is also very important to me. The League of Friends, a local charity, has written to me to highlight its concerns. It raises millions of pounds every year to buy necessary equipment for our hospital. Its volunteers work extremely hard and provide a lot for our hospital, but they are concerned about the hospital's £19 million debt. It fears that, if not addressed, that could lead to cuts in services or staff. The Government have focused greatly on the reduction of debt to third-world countries, and I applaud them for that, but I hope that they can show the same generosity to my hospital, writing off its debt so that it can progress without such a millstone round its neck.

I recently asked the chairman of the Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals NHS Trust what was the one thing that would benefit the hospital over the next four years, and he said unequivocally "Payment by results." He said that the hospital was efficient and that if the Government introduced payment by results more quickly, it would benefit by millions of pounds every year, so that is a matter that I shall raise.

The Government have given autonomy to Wales, so the Welsh Assembly, just across the border, has very different policies from those of England. Therefore the Powys health authority pays a different charge for every patient who crosses the border to use our Royal Shrewsbury hospital. That difference means a £2 million deficit for the hospital every year. We welcome Welsh patients who come across the border to use our hospital, but I shall be urging the Secretary of State for Health and others on the Treasury Bench to make the Welsh Assembly look again at its policy of paying different rates for its patients, because that adversely affects English hospitals all along the border, not just the Royal Shrewsbury hospital. Those debts have led to car parking charges, and we now have to pay each time we visit the hospital. Senior citizens who frequently visit relatives there have to pay £2 each time they leave their car there. That is something that I want to get rid of.

I am very keen on getting a direct rail link to London. Shrewsbury is the only county town in England that does not have a direct rail link to our capital city. Such a link would be extremely important to both tourism and business investment, and I shall be pressing the Secretary of State for Transport to help me to achieve that.

Shropshire is a relatively prosperous area where house prices are going through the roof, making it difficult for young people to get on to the property ladder, and that is a huge issue in Shrewsbury. The Government have set a target for my council to build 500 affordable homes in the borough in the foreseeable future. Today I spoke not to Peter Nutting, the leader of the council, because he like me is a Conservative politician, but to one of the key officers on the council to obtain an independent view. I asked him what he needed to help him to provide affordable housing, and he said that in April 2003 the Labour Government took away the local authority social housing grant. That is the single measure that has made it more and more difficult to provide affordable housing. I shall be asking why that grant has been taken away and I shall be fighting to have it reintroduced.

Shrewsbury is situated on the River Severn and so experiences terrible flooding. In 2000, the Prime Minister came to Shrewsbury and promised us lots of extra money for flood defences. I am sorry to have to inform the House that very little progress has been made on that front, so I shall be pressing the Prime Minister on that. However, I do have one ally who is a constituent and close friend of mine. I have had tea with him on a number of occasions and my wife and I have been invited to dinner soon. His name is Leo Blair, and he is the Prime Minister's father. I hope that during the next four years Leo Blair will help me to ensure that the Prime Minister always remembers Shrewsbury and helps me to do the best for our beautiful town.

7 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my first contribution in the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate all hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches this afternoon. In particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on his excellent maiden speech—no pressure there then!

Tony Banks is a hard act to follow. He is flamboyant, funny, quick-witted, scathing and unique. Before he entered this House, he was a prominent member of the Greater London council—he was its chairman when it was abolished. In 1983, he was elected MP for Newham, North-West, which subsequently became West Ham. He and I are both immensely proud to have inherited the seat of Keir Hardie, the first Labour MP.

During his time in Parliament, Tony was appointed Minister for Sport and the Prime Minister's envoy for the bid to host the 2006 World cup—we all know that those subjects are close to his heart. Tony is not afraid of controversy: he is warm, generous and often humorous; he is vegetarian, a republican and a Chelsea supporter; he is one of Parliament's staunchest supporters of animal rights; and he is a proponent of the anti-fox hunting and anti-vivisection movements. Tony's friends are only too aware of the problem that he faces when his cat brings something in from the garden—which furry animal should he support?

Tony has not been lost to Parliament. On 13 May, it was announced that he is to be made a life peer, and I hope that he will be as effective an advocate of social justice in the other place as he has been here. Perhaps his elevation is an omen for West Ham United football club, which will hopefully also be elevated to another place—the premier league—next Monday. Tony undoubtedly put West Ham on the map, and I hope to emulate his passion and his energy, because my constituents deserve no less than that.

The West Ham constituency is in London's east end. It consists of Stratford, Plaistow, Canning Town, Forest Gate and Upton Park. It has good transport links and, given the imminent arrival of the channel tunnel rail link, it is a gateway to central London and the rest of Europe. During the second world war, my constituency suffered as a prime target for bombing, and, on the 60th anniversary of the end of that terrible conflict, I think it appropriate to remember the losses and contributions made by the people of the east end.

West Ham is now a wonderfully youthful, vibrant and diverse area—possibly the most diverse area on the planet. In the past 20 years, however, it has consistently been in the top five most deprived areas in England and Wales. In the short journey of six stops on the Jubilee line from here to my constituency, life expectancy for children living in those particular areas decreases by six years. Simply put, my local authority and health authority do not get sufficient funding to deal with the problems. We have inner-London problems, but we do not get inner-London money. We lose out by some £60 million a year because of an arbitrary historical boundary. It is indefensible. I have pledged to campaign hard for that money, and I will respectfully approach my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to see whether we can bring that long campaign to a successful end.

West Ham is not financially rich, but it is rich in talent and ability. It remains a place with many needs, but it presents massive opportunities. Many, I hope, are about to be realised. Before I look to the future, I want to highlight one clear regeneration success story in my constituency, which, I suggest, is due to the use of a bottom-up regeneration process rather than a top-down approach. Twenty years ago, Green street, Upton Park, was dying on its feet—the two exceptions were West Ham United, which had its best ever league season in 1986, and, sadly, the local jobcentre. Then a few local traders, who were mainly Asian and African, spotted an opportunity and took a risk. At first, the trade was in food products or fabrics that retail chains did not stock. That has gradually changed, and now the main business in the street is in high-value designer fashions and jewellery. Green street is a one-stop wedding shop, and people come from miles around to shop there. A supportive council and an aspiring, energetic community saw the potential and drove that project forward.

Partnerships with communities are essential for sustained social and economic prosperity. Stratford is about to undergo a major transformation. Stratford City, the largest urban development in the country, will create an additional 5,000 homes, thousands of retail and office jobs and new health and education facilities. It is essential that local people benefit from that huge and welcome regeneration. That is why I am grateful that a Labour Government are leading at this exciting but pivotal time. The Government have demonstrated that they both understand and are committed to a sustainable communities agenda, affordable homes for our residents, real jobs for our people, health centres, schools, parks, libraries and leisure centres for our families and children. How different from the market-first, people-last strategies of the '80s, when the wealth from regeneration was expected to trickle down—the trickle-down was too paltry to create a puddle in my area.

In order for many of my neighbours to share in the wealth created in London, we must recognise how the special circumstances in the capital militate against poorer communities. The introduction of the minimum wage by this Labour Government has been crucial, and it was an historic achievement, but given that London is one of the most expensive cities in the world, a minimum wage is not a living wage, and I would be grateful if the Low Pay Commission were to explore that issue.

I am pleased to see that the Queen's Speech contains a housing benefit Bill. A specific London factor works against my constituents who want to work and to keep a roof over their heads. With rising house prices, come higher rents, and when that factor is coupled with the housing benefit taper, which is currently set at 65 per cent., a poverty trap is created. For every extra £1 that a person earns, they lose 65p in benefit, and I respectfully request a review to explore alternatives to that very steep taper to ensure that work pays in my constituency.

I cannot make my maiden speech without referring to the Olympic and Paralympic games. I think that West Ham is already the centre of the universe, but it may be the centre of an amazing drama of extraordinary human endeavour in 2012. Our bid is like Kelly Holmes—poised on the final bend; striving; victorious; and first over the finishing line. The Olympics will bring

opportunity in the form of billions of pounds of national, regional and local business over the next eight years and more. The Olympics will see the creation of thousands of new jobs in construction, IT, media, retail, health, hospitality, sport and the creative industries—real jobs. A visionary and aspirational Government made the bid for the Olympics, and the fact that the London Olympics Bill will come before the House after the decision in Singapore demonstrates their commitment to making the London 2012 Olympics the best ever games.

The transforming nature of the Olympic flame provides an historic opportunity to invigorate the UK and radically transform east London and my constituency, which I am honoured to serve. As with the regeneration of Green street, and all other Green streets up and down the land, the opportunity will be fully realised, deep-rooted and sustained only if the community is engaged and involved with the physical and social changes. Local authorities are uniquely charged with that responsibility and are uniquely positioned to discharge it. I ask Ministers to ensure that the legislation fully recognises the essential role of local government in the planning, delivery and legacy phases of the London 2012 games.

The regeneration of communities is a partnership between the different tiers of government, their agencies and the communities that they serve. The Government have consistently provided my constituents with the tools that they need to contribute to and benefit from the wealth of this nation such as the minimum wage, tax credits, neighbourhood renewal funds, the new deal for communities, Sure Start and children's centres, to name but a few. I am asking for that partnership to grow to meet the real needs of my constituents.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the House for listening attentively and with such respect.

7.9 pm

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) on an excellent speech in which she gave every indication that she will be a formidable Member of this House. It was a confident delivery of a very competent speech. I also congratulate the other seven Members who made their maiden speeches today; I am sure that the whole House will want to endorse their kind remarks about their predecessors. The House may want to consider making some adjustments to one of the camera settings, as if the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) continues to stand underneath it, a fast swing round might give us a safety at work issue to resolve.

There was some rancour at the beginning of this afternoon's proceedings, and it was clear that Front Benchers were bringing some of the arguments that they had had during the election campaign into the Chamber. I have no objection to that—it is just that I do not have anybody left in Northern Ireland to debate with. It is perhaps worth while my putting on the record the fact that my party has now established itself as the main party in Northern Ireland at local government level, Assembly level, European level and now here in the House of Commons. Sadly, although we have nine Members in this House, we have no representation in the other place; that is an issue that the Prime Minister must resolve, especially as a lot of business commences in the House of Lords and we require scrutiny in that House as well.

As I said, there has been something of a regime change in Northern Ireland, and it is important that the Government take time not only to respect the verdict of the people of Northern Ireland but to try to understand and to reflect the views that they so clearly expressed at the ballot box.

In the Gracious Speech, Her Majesty's Government say that they are

"committed to creating safe and secure communities, and fostering a culture of respect."

I want to address that on two levels—first, in the context that has a nationwide application, and then in that which has a particular resonance in Northern Ireland.

I was first elected to this House more than 26 years ago, and I can recall from those early days the details of the problems that I was asked to resolve at my advice surgeries. I am given very different problems today. I would barely have an advice surgery now without having to deal with problems relating to neighbour disputes, gangs, low-level crime, the problems of youths causing intimidation and abusing others, and the growing problem of crime against the elderly. There has been a transformation in society, not for the better in this instance, which must be addressed. I therefore have no compunction in supporting the Government's proposals on antisocial behaviour orders, although they will need to be somewhat tweaked as experiences are gained. The Government will also find in me a supporter of the principle of the promised legislation in the Gracious Speech to tackle knives, guns and alcohol-related violence. I trust that it will be competent to deal with the problems that the Government and I would seek to have resolved.

It will be useful if the Minister is able to tell us whether the violent crime Bill and the identity cards Bill will apply in all their aspects to Northern Ireland and, if not, the extent to which they will apply. I have no difficulty with the principle of the ID cards legislation in terms of the social liberty issues with which other Members may have difficulty—my only concern is about its workability, as there are considerable doubts as to whether it will be capable of delivering the Government's intention.

All the measures in the Gracious Speech intended to protect and to safeguard communities require police on the ground and resources for them. Sadly, there have been massive reductions in the police service that looks after the people of Northern Ireland. That service has undergone very considerable change through the Patten commission report, but the downsizing is now such that it is scarcely possible to make the rapid response required to deal with many of the crimes that are taking place.

If the crimes that I have mentioned are bad in terms of the general national scale, there is a particular problem in Northern Ireland that makes them more acute—the fact that there is sometimes almost support, from some sections of our community, for criminal activity. That has blurred the edges, as people seem to think that it is all right, in certain circumstances, for certain causes, to break the law. We have found that

[Mr. Peter Robinson]

many young people growing up in our society are equally flouting the law. I urge the Government to deal not only with the low-level crime in Northern Ireland but with the organised crime represented by paramilitary groups of all persuasions, but principally, clearly, by the Provisional IRA.

The mandate that I have in coming to this House is not a negative one—it is a mandate to make progress and to have political stability in Northern Ireland. However, that mandate can be achieved only if we build it on a stable foundation for political structures, and that cannot happen if those structures are to be built in partnership with a party that is still holding on to its weaponry, still continuing with paramilitary activity, and still heavily involved in gangsterism and criminality. Those must end. The Prime Minister, in what we now describe as the Blair necessities, indicated the standards that were required for entry into Government. It is not a question of the Democratic Unionist party attempting to put manners on the republican movement or saying that the republican movement has to be house trained. These are standards that are accepted by the Government, supported by the Government of the Irish Republic, and endorsed by the Government of the United States. I trust that the Prime Minister will not let the people of Northern Ireland down by fudging or blurring any of the edges in relation to those standards; they are essential.

Only on a firm, democratic basis, with completely peaceful politics, can Northern Ireland move forward. My party is willing to move forward on that basis. I personally experienced the republican movement's behaviour in December last year, when it and we were separately negotiating with the Government, and at the very same time it was engaged in the greatest bank heist in history. That indicates the mindset that we have to deal with, why we cannot fudge the issues, and why it is essential, before progress can be made in Northern Ireland, that the Government recognise that it can be made only with those parties that are exclusively committed to peaceful and democratic means.

7.20 pm

Mr. Ian Austin (Dudley, North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) and to have listened to the eight previous maiden speeches this afternoon.

It is a great honour to be elected to Parliament at all, but representing Dudley, North is particularly special for me because I represent my home town and the community in which I grew up, went to school, got married and started a family. Dudley, North contains the historic town of Dudley surrounded by a number of smaller towns and villages, such as Gornal, Sedgley and Coseley, which it was my great privilege to represent on Dudley council.

Few places can match our history, stretching from our internationally recognised geological heritage with unique prehistoric fossils found only on the Wren's Nest. The name of the town is of Saxon origin, and the town and its castle, which watches over the town to this day, are both listed in the Domesday Book. The castle was held for the king during the civil war. Parliamentary troops laid siege, and its fortifications were subsequently largely demolished by order of Parliament, but hon. Members can rest assured that local people have pretty much forgiven Parliament by now.

The first Labour MP for Dudley was Colonel George Wigg, who was elected in 1945 after a distinguished military career. He was an early advocate of measures to address the problems of lack of respect in society, which have dominated the headlines this week. Politicised in the Army, he discussed in his memoirs ways of ensuring that young people lived

"in obedience to the rules that civilised life in a community requires",

which is a major theme of today's debate. He left the Commons in 1968 and Donald Williams represented Dudley for two years before Labour won the seat back in 1970. I remember as a child in the very early '70s our home being visited by his successor, now the right hon. Lord Gilbert, who came to discuss plans for the Dudley community relations council, which my Dad helped set up. It was a moment of great excitement in the Austin household, and I can still remember being warned by my parents to be on my best behaviour.

John Gilbert served the town with distinction for 27 years. He must be the only person to have held the same ministerial job 20 years apart as a Member first of the Commons then as a peer, serving as Minister of State for Defence in 1976 to 1979 and in 1997 to 1999. However, I want to pay particular tribute to my immediate predecessor, Ross Cranston. He also served in Government, as Solicitor-General, and served Parliament as a member of the Standards and Privileges Committee. Many hon. Members will know Ross, as I do, for his dedication and hard work, and for his kindness and commitment to his constituents, which won him the respect and affection of his colleagues here and of the people of Dudley. He set high standards, and I will do everything that I can to live up to them as I represent such a great town.

Dudley is the capital of the black country, the birthplace of the industrial revolution and the home of manufacturing. Dudley's success and prosperity was based on the traditional black country traits of hard work, high skills, ingenuity, enterprise and innovation. However, our community has still not fully recovered from the devastating industrial and economic upheaval of the early 1980s. Those recessions sent the traditional industries on which Dudley's prosperity had been based to the wall. Factories and foundries closed and we lost thousands of manufacturing jobs. That experience had a profound effect on me. When I left school, Dudley was a high-unemployment area. At its peak, 3,300 young people had been out of work for more than six months. Today, the figure is just 220. Unemployment is down 40 per cent. and more than 1,000 local young people are in work through the new deal.

Nowadays, most people in Britain come into contact with manufacturing only as consumers, and status is too often determined by what one owns and consumes rather than what one makes. However, a quarter of the black country's economy relies on manufacturing, and 30 per cent. of the work force works in manufacturing compared with 18 per cent. nationally. In Dudley,

manufacturers such as Thomas Dudley Ltd, Federal Welder Ltd and Boss Design Ltd are investing in new technologies, developing new products, opening up new markets, winning new business around the world and creating new jobs. Our problem is that we need more such world-beating firms because we suffer from lower than average wages, and although business start-ups are in line with the national average, survival rates are lower. We also need to improve skills, which is why I want to work with local schools, colleges, the work force, trade unions, employers and business organisations to make boosting skills our No. 1 priority. We will attract the high-wage high-skill jobs on which our future prosperity depends only if we have the skills that those firms need.

Among the other challenges that we face are how to reverse the fortunes of our town centre, and the priority must again be to work with the council and the private sector to regenerate the area by bringing in new housing, new investment, businesses and jobs into the town. I recently met tenants' and residents' organisations and community groups across the constituency, particularly in the Castle and Priory and St. Thomas's wards, which are the constituency's most deprived areas. I am pressing for new community facilities and a new community pharmacy on the Priory estate. Despite additional investment, there are still housing and environmental problems in many areas, and there is a need for additional community facilities particularly for young people.

I shall touch briefly on the rules that govern children's homes. A company called Green Corns is buying up homes in the black country to open new children's homes. Everyone knows that provision must be made for such children; no one is in any doubt about that. It may be that the company's approach has worked elsewhere, but its secretive behaviour in the black country and its failure to establish good relations with its neighbours and work with the local community has caused huge local concern. Local authorities should require planning approval so that local people know what is happening and can have their voices heard, as they would with any other building being turned from a family home into a commercial venture. Can we use the current review of regulatory organisations, which I am told covers the Commission for Social Care Inspection, to bring such homes under the planning process and require companies to work properly with the local community?

My constituency is extremely well served by three campaigning newspapers, the *Express and Star*, its sister paper the *Dudley Chronicle* and the *Dudley News*. However, instead of working with the community, Green Corns has disgracefully put its efforts into obtaining an injunction against the *Express and Star*, which is merely reporting the concerns caused by its approach.

On Friday I met Chief Superintendent Green from Dudley police, and I congratulate him and his officers on the fall in crime that they have achieved through proper partnership working between the police, the local community, businesses and other organisations. In particular, I want to tell my colleagues on the Front Bench of the difference made by the extra police and new community support officers that we have on the streets, and of my hope that we will see more CSOs patrolling our streets in the future. Chief Superintendent Green told me of the tough stance that he has taken with irresponsible licensees, so I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the Queen's Speech proposals to clamp down on pubs and clubs persistently selling alcohol to under-18s.

In conclusion, I hope that I have managed to convey my great pride in the wonderful place that I represent. I commend to anybody who would like further details the local websites yampy.co.uk and sedgleylocalhistory.org.uk. Alternatively, I extend to Members an invitation to visit the town, when I will personally escort them on a tour of its most important places, including the castle and the world-renowned Black Country Living museum, where they could see the skill and enterprise that made our region great. They can watch metalworking and glasscutting and, afterwards, I will buy them a pint of black country real ale in the Bottle and Glass inn, or we could go to Woodsetton for a pint of Golden Glow, or one of the other delicious beers brewed by the award-winning Holden's brewery in my constituency.

It is an enormous privilege to be elected to Parliament, but it is also a huge responsibility. It is not one that I take lightly, and I will do everything that I can to live up to the trust that the people in Dudley, North have placed in me. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak this evening, and I thank the House for listening to me.

7.27 pm

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin), who, in his maiden speech, addressed the House with a combination of skill, wit, authority and, to use his word, pride—pride in his constituency, pride in his surroundings and pride in having arrived in this House to represent his people. As it happens, I know the hon. Gentleman's immediate predecessor, Ross Cranston. He is an immensely intelligent and engaging man. The hon. Gentleman spoke movingly about his predecessor, and he will be a very good successor indeed to Ross Cranston. We look forward with interest and respect to his future contributions to proceedings.

I also congratulate a number of other Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I refer, of course, to the hon. Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for Portsmouth, North (Sarah McCarthy-Fry) and for Tooting (Mr. Khan), the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who seems to bear many of the admirable traits of her immediate and remarkable predecessor, and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Susan Kramer), who is something of a seasoned professional in politics. This is before I even get to the bit that I treasure most, as a continuing party animal, which is to pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Newbury (Mr. Benyon), for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) and for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski).

I have had the pleasure and privilege of knowing my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury for many years. He loves his constituency, he is part of his constituency, he was determined to represent his constituency—and in the end he got here. He spoke with great warmth and sincerity about his patch and the challenges that it faces.

[John Bercow]

My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor described in compelling terms the journey that he has made from what he called his humble origins to the success and status that he is fortunate enough to enjoy today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham displayed a near-encyclopaedic knowledge of his constituency—very impressive in a debut performance—culminating in a witty and appropriate reference to the special relationship that he is cultivating with the Prime Minister's father. If that does the trick in securing an improvement in public performance, we shall all owe a debt of gratitude to my hon. Friend. And by the way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I am to have any chance of being called to speak, either in debates or at Question Time, I know that I must always resolve to sit in front of my hon. Friend and not behind him.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in this debate. The hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) threw down a very legitimate gauntlet to the Conservative Opposition earlier. I cannot speak for my right hon. and hon. Friends—I gave up attempting to do so some time ago—but for my own part, I want to make it clear that I remain implacably opposed, on grounds of principle and practicality, to the introduction of identity cards. The Government's arguments on this matter have consistently shifted, and none of them is persuasive. I shall endeavour to persuade my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to go the right way on this subject, but whether they do or not, just as I spoke and voted against the introduction of identity cards in the last Parliament, so I intend to continue to do so now.

There are good things in the Queen's Speech. In what they have set out so far, the Government are picking up on a number of important public priorities. The difficulty, of course, is that the devil is in the detail. So much will depend on the practicality, and on the extent to which the Government are sufficiently rigorous in their pursuit of their objectives and display the necessary determination to overcome the people and things that tend to get in the way.

I should like to focus on a number of the specifics in the Queen's Speech. The first point that I want to make is that immigration and asylum should not be artificially conflated and confused. They should not be regarded as synonymous—they are not. On immigration, let me make it clear that I welcome the Government's intention to introduce a points-based system for admission to this country. Yes, I believe in controlled immigration, but I also believe that it is incumbent on people of good faith in all parts of the House to be as ready to proclaim a commitment to fairness in immigration policy as they are to proclaim a commitment to firmness. A successful, free enterprise capitalist economy needs a decent level of immigration. The economic as well as the moral arguments for immigration need to be made, and I am not afraid to make them.

On asylum policy, let us be explicit in our debate. There are currently people in this country who should not be here. Equally, there are people who are not in this country but who, in a fair system, should be. I was appalled to hear recent testimony of people trying to get to this country from Darfur who were denied the chance to do so because they were told by the Government that it would be safe for them to relocate to Khartoum. That is a bogus and ignorant argument that completely underestimates the significance, power and ill intent of the state apparatus in Sudan. I want to see firmness, but I also want to see fairness. I did not make a party political issue of immigration or asylum in my constituency, and I do not seek to do so now.

The Government's proposals on incapacity benefit represent an important area of public policy, and the way in which Ministers reform it—by retitling it and dividing it into two parts—should be driven by the extent of the abuse that is being committed, rather than by an anticipation of the level of revolt that they will face for seeking to address the problem. In other words, if they do the right thing and are fair in giving support to those who need help while denying it to those who do not, the Conservatives should not play games; we should support them. If, however, the Government simply cower at the first sign of grapeshot from left-wing Labour Back Benchers, we should not support them. We have a duty as a constructive Opposition to point out the error of the Government's ways. The opportunity is theirs. I shall try to take a constructive approach and I shall not be afraid to support the Government when I believe that they are right—sometimes flying in the face of judgments made by my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): Never!

John Bercow: My hon. Friend speaks from the Front Bench with a degree of intensity and feeling.

There is much to do on education, but I want to make one important point. Using private money to support and bolster the public sector is one thing, and I favour it. Using public money to support and bolster the private sector is quite another, which I do not favour. There are lessons to be learned by my own party in its approach to this subject as we seek a reformed and strengthened public sector capable of delivering for the interests of the majority.

On House of Lords reform, there is a difference between destructive and constructive reform. It is all very well for the Government to say that they will get rid of the remaining hereditaries. Let me make it clear that I find the hereditaries' continued presence intellectually difficult to defend, and I am not one to say that their removal cannot be justified. I believe that the Government can make a case for it. I do not believe, however, that the Government should simply get rid of something without putting something substantial, constructive and enduring in its place. If the Government can combine the removal of the hereditary principle with a constructive proposal for sustainable reform along the lines argued for by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) and the former Member for North Cornwall, Paul Tyler, representing the Parliament First group, I say three cheers to that.

My final observation to the Government is that allowing sufficient time for debate on all these important measures is not a sign of weakness; it is a display of strength. If the Government really believe that they have

a compelling case for their measures, they should not be shy about it. They should allow other views to be expressed, and ensure that there is time for that. They should listen to the public, who feel that the Government, for all their good intentions, are often too arrogant and too dismissive of other views. I hope that they will turn over a new leaf, and in the interests of the country, I wish them well with the legislative programme that they have outlined.

7.37 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster, North) (Lab): I am most grateful for the chance to address the House for the first time. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), who is known throughout the House for his independence of spirit, which we have seen on display again today, and which I am sure would be welcomed on these Benches. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for Portsmouth, North (Sarah McCarthy-Fry), for Tooting (Mr. Khan), for West Ham (Lyn Brown), and for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin) for their maiden speeches today, and to all hon. Members for their eloquent contributions.

In preparing my own speech, I looked back at the maiden speeches of my predecessors, and was struck by that of the radical reformer, Richard Cobden, who opened his account in the 1841 Queen's Speech debate. He told Members that it was not

"his desire to trespass long upon their attention"—

but it is hard to deal briefly with the case against the corn laws. Cobden's speech, in its abbreviated form, stretched over 13 columns of *Hansard* and was estimated to have lasted at least 50 minutes. There is no record of how many Members remained in the Chamber at the end. The time limit on our speeches today means that I shall certainly not be emulating his precedent.

By custom and, more importantly, out of respect, I want to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Kevin Hughes, who sadly retired from the House because of illness. For 13 years, following his service as a miner, he served the people of Doncaster, North with great distinction, fighting for the place he came from and the people he grew up with. He served for four years in the Government Whips Office and, while I gather that it is hard to be a popular Whip, I know that many Members will miss his frankness, his integrity and his friendship. I thank him for the kindness that he has shown to me. In my constituency, too, there is the highest regard and warmest affection for Kevin and for his wife Linda, who so brilliantly assisted him with thousands of constituency cases. I promise my constituents and this House that I will try to live up to the standard that they set. I also pay tribute to Mick Welsh, Kevin's predecessor for 13 years, who served first in Don Valley and then in the newly created Doncaster, North.

Unlike Kevin, Mick or their predecessors, my roots do not lie in Doncaster. I am the son of two immigrants who met in London after the war, who had strong political beliefs, to which I refer because it helps to explain why I am here today. Ours was a socialist household, in which we were brought up not just to think that the injustices of society were wrong, but to believe that through political change, something could be done about them. Of course, as we grow up all of us make our own way. But it is right to recognise that it is this upbringing and that belief which brings me to this House to represent Doncaster, North.

Mine is a constituency that surprises those who visit it. Far from being an urban seat, as many assume, it is composed of a series of villages to the north of the town. It is a place with great and sweeping countryside, including Sykehouse, the longest village in England, the Thorne and Hatfield moors, renowned for their natural beauty, and Askern lake. We are also home to Saxon churches and the Norman church of St. Mary Magdalene in Campsall, where it is said that Robin Hood and Maid Marian were married. As strong believers in redistribution, people in Doncaster, North are happy to reclaim his roots.

And yet, despite our picturesque scenery, the lifeblood of my constituency was, until the 1980s, the mining industry. When Mick Welsh rose to make his maiden speech 26 years ago yesterday, four major pits dominated our landscape—Askern, Bentley, Brodsworth and Hatfield—directly supporting many thousands of families. All are now closed, although we are working for the reopening of Hatfield, which could not only provide access to half of the accessible coal reserves in England but offers the prospect of a new clean coal power station. That is an endeavour in which we hope to secure financial as well as moral support from the Government. We therefore face the challenge of massive industrial transition, with all that that entails for both the economy and the community.

Our advantage is that Doncaster, led by an elected Labour mayor, is a town—in fact, a city in all but name—on the up, experiencing the economic prosperity that is returning to the north of England. We have a new international airport, which was opened last month, one of only three UK airports with a runway large enough to accommodate the new Airbus A380. The airport is already expanding horizons, as shown by the eloquent letters that I have received from class 4 at Toll Bar primary school, which I shall visit on Friday. Our new education complex, Education City, when it opens next year, will, we are confident, become a university with several area-based campuses, including one in my constituency. We are also well served by local newspapers, although during the campaign my recognition factor suffered a bit of a setback when one campaign profile mistakenly substituted for a picture of me a photo of a brick wall.

As Doncaster revives, we in the northern villages will not necessarily share in the prosperity without the right sort of intervention by national and local government. Doncaster, North has great attributes, with pit traditions of community and fraternity, countryside, and most of all the people—honest, fair and hardworking—but at the same time the scars of the last two decades run deep. Therefore, as befits the representative of a progressive party, I come to this House not to talk about the gains that there have been, important though they are, but to say that we still have a long way to go to create the society that we seek. Despite progress in the past eight years, Britain is still a country too unequal, too divided by class and status, too distant from the goal even of equality of opportunity.

[Edward Miliband]

Therefore, what are our needs? Above all, we need a Government who will keep investing in our social and economic infrastructure. If my constituents are to get to the new jobs that are being created at the airport and elsewhere, we need investment in rail, road and bus services. In addition, people often ask me why, if the Mayor of London can regulate London's bus service so that it serves the people, we in Doncaster cannot do so?

To tackle disadvantage at its source, we need not just our three new Sure Start centres but such centres in every area, not just because of the services that they provide but because they represent a new focus for the community. I congratulate our secondary schools on their progress in GCSE performance, but we are still a long way behind the national average, and we need the most modern facilities not just in our new academy in Thorne but in every school. And to raise participation in higher education—still less than half the national average—we need not just the new Doncaster university, but to raise the sights of young people and to keep expanding university places.

The message that I received loud and clear in this campaign was that as we seek to revive our spirit of community, youth services must become a higher priority. What many young people on our streets told me is that there was nowhere for them to go and nothing for them to do. The young people whom I met are not yet cynical, nor are they without hope, nor are the vast majority troublemakers, but many feel that nobody really listens. They are tomorrow's voters—or, regrettably, non-voters. Respect is a two-way street. Many older people feel that young people do not show enough respect, but young people feel neglected by our society. If we can show them that we are listening and will respond to their needs, I am convinced that it will make an impact far beyond the immediate provision of youth services. That will be a priority for me as I try to serve my constituency in this House.

I want to end by referring to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Communities and Local Government, who is winding up the debate tonight. It is daunting, on such occasions, to have members of one's family watching in the Public Gallery—but worse, I feel, to have them sitting in the Chamber. As the House will know, he and I are now the only brothers in this place, although there are two sets of distinguished Labour sisters. I quickly offer this reassurance to the House: there are no more Miliband brothers to come. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that two is more than enough.

I also want to put on the record, however, how much my family owes to this country. Our father left Belgium in 1940 on the last boat to Britain, the evening before the Nazis arrived, and would have perished without the welcoming arms of a country that recognised its duty to help those fleeing from terror. I hope that I and my brother, in the service that we give in the House, can in some small way help to repay the debt that we owe to this country. In my contributions in this House, I will strive to reflect not only the voices of the constituents who put me here this month, but the humanity and solidarity shown to my family more than 60 years ago, which led my family out of the dark times of despair to a place of hope, and me to the Floor of this House today. I thank the House for listening.

7.46 pm

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): As I speak for the first time in the House, I am not only humbled but aware of the great burden of trust and expectation that has been placed on me by the voters of Reading, East. I thank them for their trust, and I promise that I will not let them down. I congratulate the hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Edward Miliband) on his excellent maiden speech, made with enthusiasm for and pride in his constituency. As he could not see the Minister of Communities and Local Government on the Front Bench, may I tell him that he sat listening with a great deal of enthusiasm and pride, too?

May I pay tribute, as is customary on these occasions, to my predecessor, the former Labour MP for Reading, East, Jane Griffiths? Jane represented the constituency from 1997 to 2005, and was notable as the first woman to represent a Reading constituency. She was a skilled linguist—the only Japanese and Korean speaker in the House in the last two Parliaments—and did a great deal to give prominence to a number of unfashionable causes. Her work for sufferers of ectopic pregnancies and male cancers has been singled out for praise from across the political divide. She was also an enthusiast for rats—although sadly, it seems, she was ultimately ratted on by her local party. Despite this poor treatment she maintained the respect of her constituents, as reflected in the supportive letters sent to local newspapers.

Jane Griffiths was well known for her support for Crossrail and her determination to make the western terminus Reading. The Crossrail Bill is supported by all parties in Reading, East as a much needed enhancement for commuters. It is, however, a matter of great concern to my constituents that the plan is for the rail scheme to stop in Maidenhead. That makes absolutely no economic sense, as local business organisations have made clear, and could adversely affect the region's long-term economic development. For that reason, I am determined to continue the hard work of my predecessor in seeking to have the western terminus extended to Reading.

Some years ago, the boundary commission determined that Reading should be a town of two halves. While I know less of affairs in the western part, by a curious twist of fate, I believe that all that is best, brightest, exotic and uplifting is concentrated in the east. With a fine and highly regarded university, a regional retail centre and a major technological and industrial sector, the constituency lies at the heart of the prosperous Thames valley region. In fact, I liked the area so much that I moved there more than 20 years ago, and I am still proud to call it my home.

Geographically, my constituency includes the communities of Caversham, the bulk of Reading town centre and parts of the Wokingham district towns of Woodley and Earley. The superb biography of William Pitt the Younger, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), notes that former Speaker Addington lived in Woodley, and after Pitt's resignation, went on to become Prime Minister. I assure the House that my ambitions are far more modest, and if members of my local press are watching, I am ruling out a bid for the leadership! That should make the front page in Reading.

Reading, East is a focal point for the information technology sector, and is proud to boast many of the top international IT companies such as Microsoft and Oracle. There is also a large banking and finance sector, represented by companies such as Prudential. I am grateful to all the wealth-creating companies in my constituency, large and small, which make such a great contribution to the wealth of the region. I will be their champion. Another major employer in the town is the borough council. Working in local government can often be thankless and frustrating, but I have been impressed by the professionalism and dedication of the many council staff with whom I have come into contact.

Reading, East has some excellent schools, both secondary and primary, but it faces enormous challenges, especially in the Reading borough. Reading's local education authority has been categorised by Ofsted as barely satisfactory, and about 40 per cent. of parents do not send their children to its schools. Many local parents and pupils have not been served well. I intend to support the dedicated teachers and LEA staff in turning around the parts of the system that are failing. I believe that Reading can learn much from the excellent LEA in Wokingham, and I hope that it will take the opportunity sooner rather than later to approach that LEA for advice and support, which I am sure will be given willingly.

I am a parent with a child at a local school. I was fortunate enough to be able to send my child to the local school of my choice. Dozens of local parents have not been so fortunate. Most affected are parents wishing to send children to Emmer Green primary school. It is imperative for good schools, with the support of parents, teachers and governors—as is the case at Emmer Green—to be allowed to expand, and for children to be granted places at their local schools.

I now turn to the content of the Queen's speech, and in particular to the violent crime Bill. In the past six months, Reading, East has had more than its fair share of violent crime and murder. In January there was a fatal drive-by shooting at Cemetery junction, and Members will have recently read of the brutal murder of my constituent Mary-Ann Leneghan, who was just 16 years old. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing sincere condolences to the family. What happened to Mary-Ann and her friend, who was shot in the head and callously left for dead, demonstrates that there are people who operate outside what we all regard as the norms of civilised society.

As Members of this House we must ensure, for the sake of our constituents and of our families, that those with the capacity to commit such gross acts of evil are given no quarter. It is crucial for the police to be given support, not just in terms of funding but by the local community. I am pleased to say that that has been the case in Reading, East, where the strength of our community has meant that people have come forward at great risk to themselves to achieve what I pray will be the end result: justice for Mary-Ann.

I am sure that the House will also join me in saluting the excellent work of the local police force. As Members may have heard, a number of arrests have been made, and we all have high hopes that those who are guilty of these terrible crimes will be punished. I cannot help feeling, however, that a sense of security on our streets will be fully restored only if the police are equipped with the necessary manpower and tools to fight and win the battle against violent crime.

Reading is well known for the three Bs: beer, bulbs and biscuits. The bulbs and biscuits have faded in significance, but beer still plays a huge role. Like so many other urban centres, Reading town centre suffers from binge drinking and yobbish behaviour. I would like to see an extension of the experience of the London borough of Richmond, where a voluntary code of conduct has been implemented banning "happy hour" promotions in bars and pubs. Even at this early stage, the initial figures show a stark drop in violent crime in Twickenham and Richmond town centres. I was delighted to hear today that hundreds of pubs have recognised that, and decided to join in a voluntary ban on happy hours.

I thank the House for its indulgence. I hope that I may be allowed to catch Mr. Speaker's eye on future occasions, so that I can again speak up for the constituents of Reading, East.

7.55 pm

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): It is with great pride that I rise to make my maiden speech, following the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson) and the others who today have made their first speeches in the House. Sometimes it is more difficult to speak late in the evening, knowing the quality that one has to follow.

In the early hours of 6 May, I promised the people of Bridgend that I would be working for them from day one. I kept my promise and, after three hours' sleep, I arrived at Westminster to begin my induction, collecting my security pass and the beginning of what I am sure will soon become a forest of paperwork.

During the first 10 days, I have been introduced to many Members who have told me what a charming man my predecessor Win Griffiths is. I have been told that when Win spoke in the Chamber, people knew that he would have something interesting to say and a new way of looking at the issues being debated. Win has a deserved reputation for integrity and probity, befitting a parliamentarian, Wesleyan lay preacher, teetotaller and resident of the village of Cefn Cribwr. The retirement to which Win has so looked forward will not involve simply tending his garden. He will continue to serve the people of Bridgend and south Wales as he takes on the chairmanship of Bro Morgannwg health trust, a task that he will undertake with his usual dedication and commitment.

When the Bridgend constituency was created in 1983, its first Member was Peter Hubbard Miles, who, like me, enjoys living in Porthcawl, the finest seaside resort in Wales. Peter tried living in Spain for a while, but was drawn back to the town which, the Bridgend county borough council website informs readers, has more hours of sunshine each year than Madrid. In following Peter and Win, I aspire to be as brave and fearless as Aileen Jones, helmsman of the Porthcawl lifeboat, who last week was awarded the Royal National Lifeboat Institution bronze medal for gallantry. She was the first woman ever to receive the medal. I can only pray that the storms in the House are less fearsome than those raging off the coast of my constituency.

[Mrs. Madeleine Moon]

To understand the Bridgend constituency, people must know that it is made up of two towns: Porthcawl, a tourist resort, and Bridgend, a business hotspot—the second fastest growing area in Wales, and the ninth fastest in the United Kingdom. We are home to Sony, the Ford engine plant, and many dynamic small and medium-sized businesses. Surrounding the two towns are several smaller communities and villages with strong personal identities. Our local people have great commitment to their communities and many make a personal difference to the quality of life of those among whom they live.

I am thinking of people like Helena Parobij, who sadly died earlier this year. Thanks to Helena, 750 children in the communities of Pyle, Cornelly, Kenfig Hill and Cefn Cribwr have access to a range of facilities including a skateboarding and BMX park, IT suite, music room and somewhere to chill out, meet and make friends, and even occasionally do homework. Just as important, they have access to adult support, guidance and role models. At a meeting in March to discuss financial problems at the centre, Inspector Paul Lewis told the meeting that, before KPC youth centre opened in 1998, the community was plagued with rowdy youngsters drinking and taking drugs on the street. Once 750 eight to 21-year-olds had access to the centre at different times, the number of complaints decreased considerably.

If we are to free our communities from nuisance and provide inspiration and opportunities for our youngsters, local councils must help by funding the groups that work with young people. I am sure that the House will join me in calling for Bridgend county borough council to restore the funds that it recently cut for organisations doing invaluable work with young people.

As Bridgend has expanded, newer communities such as Brackla, Wildmill and Broadlands have been built. Partnership working is critical to making those new communities succeed. In Brackla, Gordon Taylor and the residents association work with NCH, youth services and housing association staff, neighbourhood police and local councillors to try to meet the needs of a large development, while that invaluable facility in any community—the community hall—provides a range of activities from taekwondo to senior citizens club to Welsh classes.

In Wildmill, people such as Idris Jones, workers at the tenants and residents association and at the youthworks, and community support officers have helped many to leave behind or avoid the drugs culture that made life on that estate unbearable for its many law-abiding residents. During the election campaign, it was good to talk to youngsters on the estate, who would perhaps have inspired fear in many adults with their appearance and noise, yet they wanted to comprehend politics and were eager to understand and to learn about national issues.

The Broadlands development in Bridgend is an estate that was planned for 700 houses and now has more than 2,000 dwellings. Central to life there is Maes yr Haul primary school. Pupils at the school recently won a national animation award and learned about the lifestyle and traditions of Japan from parents of children attending the school who have come to work at the Sony factory in Bridgend.

One of the most rigorous question and answer sessions I experienced was at Llangynwydd primary, where I had been expecting to talk with the head teacher and staff. Instead, I was introduced to 300 primary school children who raised questions about helping the world's hungry, support for people with diabetes, stopping adults smoking and finding a cure for cancer, among many other issues. Those children will be watching the outcome of the forthcoming meeting of the G8 and will be pleased at the Government's proposals in the health improvement and protection Bill. In primary schools such as Trelales, Litchard and Pen-y-Bont and the integrated children's centre in Cornelly, it was good to see parents, governors and older residents volunteering time and listening to pupils as they read, taking an interest in their community school and investing in the future of local children.

Eight years ago, David Matthews, our director of education and leisure services, who has since died, introduced an award of citizenship for people who contributed to their community. Eight years on, the list is still growing.

I look forward to debating the new mental health Bill with Mental Health Matters and Mind. I know that the Shaw Trust will take an interest in the planned changes to incapacity benefit and that voluntary organisations such as Age Concern, Help the Aged and Shout will want to debate the provisions of the Government of Wales Bill. As someone who has worked with vulnerable adults, I know that the protection of vulnerable adults Bill will be an important addition to legislation.

It may have been noted that, unlike the other new Welsh Members, I was not born in Wales. My family has Scottish roots on my father's side and Irish roots on my mother's. My mother, who is 91, has developed a new addiction for the parliamentary channel on her digibox and will no doubt be watching today. My parents set me an example of community service, my mother provjding nursing help and support to neighbouring families and care for my grandmother, my father an active member of the sea cadets, Fellowship of the Services and the Royal Naval Reserve. It was their example that brought me here today.

I am also here today thanks to my husband Steve, who enticed me to Wales in 1976. Our son David was 21 last week. He is our Celtic crown having been born in Wales. Set possibly a poor example by his mother, he is studying politics at university.

Steve and I moved to Wales when he was appointed the first warden of the newly designated local nature reserve at Kenfig. Perhaps hon. Members will have a chance to look at a video recently compiled by Ted Davies of Kenfig when they consider proposals in the commons Bill. Kenfig is now a European site of nature conservation, a site of unique biodiversity and tranquillity. It would have become a housing estate or a caravan park if Ted and his fellow commoners had not been willing to risk their homes to battle in the High Court to keep the dunes from commercial development. I know that Ted will be watching the progress of the marine Bill to ensure that it will help with the declaration of a marine nature reserve off Sker.

Should hon. Members wish to purchase Ted's video, profits are going towards Sandville Court self-help centre, where Sister Gwyneth Poacher and her band of volunteer helpers provide support and access to a range of alternative therapies to those with terminal and debilitating illness. Without Sandville, many carers would not have coped and many people would not have faced the end of their lives with dignity and comfort. All the services and facilities at Sandville are provided through voluntary action. It is a local and national treasure.

I thank the House for its courtesy in listening to me today. I am proud to represent Bridgend, a constituency where so many hold fast to the understanding that what makes life good are the things we share, and the glue that binds communities is the things we do for others—a constituency with so many examples of how individuals can change the quality of life for their communities, especially when given the tools and legislative support of Government.

8.5 pm

Paul Rowen (Rochdale) (LD): I am grateful for the privilege of being able to give my maiden speech on the Gracious Speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) on her interesting exposé of Bridgend and on her comments about her community.

I am privileged indeed to represent the home town of John Bright, the town where the Co-op was founded and where the Workers Educational Association started. I pay tribute to my predecessors. Like me, Lorna Fitzsimons is a fellow Rochdalian. Though we are from different political parties, we have over the years worked well together, I latterly as leader of the council, she as the Member of Parliament. She has been a feisty campaigner. Many people remember how well she marshalled troops and former troops to fight the cause earlier this year when there was a threat to the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. I know that many Lancashire Fusiliers are proud of what she did to ensure that the Royal Regiment is still here. I wish her well.

I am the third Liberal Democrat to represent Rochdale since 1970. I would like to say a few words about my predecessors. Liz Lynne represented Rochdale from 1992 to 1997. She quickly established herself as a campaigner, particularly on disability and Kashmir. It is something that I hope to take up in my time here, too. I know that, in the European Parliament, she continues to fight and speak up for freedom for Kashmir.

I pay tribute to Sir Cyril Smith, who represented Rochdale for over 20 years and who, before that, did over 40 years' service as a local councillor, alderman and mayor of Rochdale. I owe him a lot. He is the reason that I got involved in politics in 1972 when, as a 17-year-old, I took part in his famous by-election. This year, almost approaching the age of 77, he came out of retirement and fought for me. He has been a fighter all his life. The town owes him much. Many charities in the town would not be there but for his hard work. Again, I pay tribute to the work that he has done both for the town and for me.

In Sir Cyril's maiden speech, he included a reference to mill closures and the effect that yarn imports were having on jobs in Rochdale. Sadly, most of those mills have closed. Like many people in Rochdale, my father was a spinner. With typical Lancashire grit, we have pulled ourselves up and now Rochdale is beginning to motor. I was privileged earlier this year to see work start on the Kingsway industrial estate, which is the largest industrial estate in the north-west. I look forward over the next few years to that bringing improved jobs and prosperity to Rochdale.

In order for that to happen, we need support from Government. I hope that members of the Government will take heed of some of the things that we need, in particular the new bus station that was not approved this year—I hope that it will be approved next year—and the Manchester Metrolink. I have here a leaflet that was produced in 1989 by the Greater Manchester passenger transport authority. That clearly stated: "Metrolink will start running" in Rochdale "in 1992". Sixteen years later—after eight years of a Conservative Government and eight years of a Labour Government—we are still waiting. I hope that in this Session we will see progress on that. It is vital for the Oldham-Rochdale loop line—if it does not go ahead, an additional £60 million will be needed just to keep that line operational. That is a quarter of the cost of the Metrolink. The money would be much better spent on a brand-new "super-tram" system than on keeping heavy rail going.

One of the legacies of Rochdale's textile past is the Turner Brothers asbestos site in Spotland—the site of what was once the largest asbestos factory in the world. As we know, that magic mineral has since turned into a killer dust, and many Members have been involved in fighting for pension rights for some of the former employees of Turner and Newell. I want to draw attention to the importance to the town of redeveloping that site, which has been bought by developers. Residents and council members of all political parties have no problem with such redevelopment, but we are concerned that the site be redeveloped safely. I am afraid that the developer, in his dealings with the council or with residents, has sometimes been less than open. Part of the problem is that a derelict industrial site such as this falls between three agencies: the Health and Safety Executive, the local authority and the Environment Agency. The HSE has only one person in the north-west looking after dereliction issues and there is no way that she can give the site the necessary attention. The Government need to consider giving local authorities greater power to act independently to ensure that developers comply with health and safety legislation. That is vital for the Rochdale site and for sites elsewhere.

Rochdale is a vibrant, multicultural community that includes, for example, people from Ukraine, Pakistan and Poland. Our council is a beacon council for cohesion and I am pleased with the steps that it and the good people of Rochdale have taken to ensure such cohesion. We are currently participating in a housing market renewal pathfinder for Oldham and Rochdale, and later this year, we will submit a bid for wave 2 of the HMR, which will include my own ward of Milkstone and Deeplish. When Ministers receive that bid, I hope that they focus not on the bricks and mortar but on our efforts to maintain community cohesion and the natural environment. Often, what is important in maintaining viable communities is not just what one spends on bricks

[Paul Rowen]

and mortar. Our plans require that some money be spent not just on the bricks and mortar, but on the people and the environment.

I am pleased to have been selected to speak this evening, and to have been elected to serve Rochdale. We have a tremendous reputation for having outspoken politicians who always put the town first. I am following some illustrious predecessors, and I hope to follow in the proud Rochdale tradition of representing our constituents in this House and of helping to contribute to the development of our country.

8.13 pm

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Rowen) and all the other new Members who have made their maiden speeches today. It has been fascinating to hear about the diverse constituencies and backgrounds, and I am sure that they will all make a solid contribution to the work of this House and to their constituents' welfare. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Susan Kramer) made special mention of the jacket that she is wearing today. I do not want to make a political or a sexist point, but I congratulate her on wearing the colours of my football team.

I want briefly to address two issues. First, I welcome the Government's commitment to introducing legislation on corporate killing. I was slightly disappointed, however, in that no Government or Opposition Front Bencher took the trouble to mention that very important Bill, which is welcomed by the trade union movement generally and by workers throughout the country. Such legislation has had a long and troubled history. In the late 1980s, a string of disasters, each shocking in itself, together showed that there was something seriously wrong with our whole approach to safety in the workplace, in transport and in public places. No individual or company was punished for any of those tragedies, yet in every case the inevitable subsequent accident investigation or public inquiry showed that disaster could have been prevented had the company or organisation involved taken steps to ensure that it operated safe systems of work within a strong safety culture.

There is a common law offence of corporate manslaughter or culpable homicide in Scotland, and in England this offence can be committed by companies or individuals. *[Interruption.]* That "Hear, hear" was perhaps a reference to the amount of money that a certain individual may have made out of such cases. An individual commits manslaughter when it can be proved beyond reasonable doubt that they caused death through gross or wilful negligence. Under current law, there is no separate test that allows the court to consider whether a company has acted with gross negligence. It is not possible, for example, for a court to consider the various failures on the company's part and to determine whether it could be said that, in aggregation, they constituted gross negligence. Corporate guilt is entirely dependent on individual guilt. As a result, it has been virtually impossible to prosecute the larger companies.

A vivid example of this situation emerged in the past 10 days or so. The practical difficulties were illustrated in the Solway Harvester case, in which seven Scottish fishermen lost their lives after a catalogue of the most appalling negligence on the part of the company's owners. The sole director of the company that owned the vessel successfully persuaded the court that he could pass his duty of care on to an experienced skipper, who died in the tragedy.

The main purpose of legislation on corporate killing is to improve safety, to act as a disincentive to poor safety systems, and to encourage companies and others to recognise that poor safety is much more expensive in every way than good and strong safety cultures and practices. If the only result of this legislation is a queue of companies before the court that are to be punished under it, we will have failed. But I am certain that the Government will not fail, and I look forward to the Bill's introduction.We have the Bill in draft form, and although there are many observations that I would like to make, this is probably not the best time to do so, given that the consultation period has not yet finished. I am conscious that the health and safety legislation has been under review for almost as long as we have been promised this Bill. Specific provision is made in the health and safety proposals, as in the corporate killing legislation, for removing Crown immunity. However, it would be helpful if that issue were dealt with in a single Bill, rather than in two separate Bills, particularly given that such a provision ought to be introduced as soon as possible.

The second issue that I want to discuss is antisocial behaviour. I am a Scottish Member, so the legislation that I deal with is different from that proposed in the Queen's Speech and that which the Government have passed in recent years, but the circumstances are the same. It is useful to consider how we operate under such legislation either side of the border, and I want to refer to a recent experience in my constituency and to some of the practical difficulties that I have experienced.

The Beach boulevard, in my constituency, is a road that runs down to the beach, as Members may have guessed from the name. It is a very wide road that attracts a lot of antisocial behaviour. Such behaviour does not always come from juveniles and the yobs to whom reference has been made in the press and occasionally here today; sometimes, quite respectable people are involved. In fact, there has been a problem with antisocial behaviour in that area for more than 35 years. People want to go there to show off their motor vehicles, and 35 years ago it started with motor bikes and scooters. Now, people drive souped-up cars around, rev their engines and sometimes race. Recently, someone was convicted of travelling in a 30 mph zone at 104 mph, which is pretty shocking in a built-up residential area. These people want to show off their cars and to race, and they cause my constituents misery. Some 300 households in that area are affected, along with the business community. The Patio hotel has had a number of instances of people leaving the hotel because they just could not cope with the noise. The council, police and everyone else have been scratching their heads for a long time, trying to work out how to deal with the problem.

In March, using new legislation introduced by the Scottish Parliament that mirrors English legislation, my police authority got a dispersal order under the antisocial behaviour legislation. It made a dramatic improvement in the lives of my constituents. I shall

make one partisan point. When that order was granted, a local MSP, Mike Rumbles—I gather he is a candidate for the leadership of the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament—described it as "verging on the illegal" and went so far as to offer his services to the defence teams of two of those who had been prosecuted under the legislation. I am not one who likes to make slogans and to vilify without evidence, but we have said for a long time that the Liberal Democrats were not serious about crime, and the statements of Mr. Rumbles give evidence of that.

We are now at a crucial point. One of the peculiarities of the legislation is that it is temporary. The order made in March lasts for three months and is due to be reviewed at the end of this month. It is there to give a local community respite and to give the authorities the opportunity to put in place a more permanent and sustainable solution to the problem. We have a difficulty, because no one has yet come forward with a solution and the police must decide whether there is evidence to justify a renewal.

Tomorrow, my local authority will consider a proposal from a Labour councillor to provide a permanent solution. The proposal is the closure of Beach boulevard, the area affected. I do not know which way the decision will go, but I have seen the report submitted by the local authority roads department, the lead department in this area. The report is totally and utterly negative. We have not yet addressed the problem that we are giving temporary powers to the police—given the gravity of the powers, they can only be temporary—but the permanent solution depends on local authorities and perhaps other agencies making decisions.

What I see in my authority is everything operating in boxes. The people who have written the report for the meeting tomorrow have addressed it as a roads issue and not as a social issue, and there seems to be no overall policy. The Government need to take a lead in this area and to work across Departments to translate that into a system with which local government can work. At Question Time today I heard a number of people criticising local authorities for their failure to act, but until we have a unified and co-ordinated approach, people will continue to have problems.

In every other respect, I welcome the Queen's Speech and I repeat my welcome for the proposed corporate killing legislation, which is extremely important for workers in this country.

8.23 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran), and particularly the reference to his football team. I am sure that we will both be able to support the same team in the Scottish cup final on Saturday. I am sure the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern) will be backing the same local team.

I was particularly taken by the comments of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Rowen) about the Manchester metrolink and I was impressed that a Liberal Democrat managed to find an issue where he could equally blame the Labour and Conservative parties. I was impressed with his maiden speech.

It is with a great sense of honour that I make my maiden speech in this House today, and with a deep sense of gratitude to the electors of Dundee, East, who have given me to the opportunity to serve them in this Parliament for as long as it lasts. I wish to pay tribute to my two predecessors in the seat; there are two because of boundary changes. The first is the Labour candidate Ian Luke, who, for the last four years, served two thirds of the new Dundee, East constituency. The second is my hon. Friend the newly returned Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), who, in the last Parliament, served the electors of Carnoustie, Monifieth and Panbride, which are now in my constituency. Both men ably represented the constituents of the new Dundee, East seat and I thank them both for their work.

The new constituency created by the boundaries is in many ways a microcosm of much of the east coast of Scotland. From the tiny village of Panbride in the north, the constituency runs down the North sea coast, through Carnoustie, with its world famous championship golf course, the seaside town of Monifieth and the prosperous borough of Broughty Ferry, down the coast of the firth of the Tay, through the docks, harbours and industry to the new housing development on the old quays, past the retail centres and into Dundee city centre. From there, the western boundary heads towards the county town of Forfar. Before reaching there, at Finlarig hill, it sweeps eastward to take in the rich farmland and the many small villages of Sidlaw, east and, from there, back to the coast.

This constituency provides a first-class environment and, for many, a very high quality of life. I am concerned that all of my constituents should have the opportunity to share in that high quality of life. Within this boundary lives a generous and industrious people. The constituency contains the gentle beauty of much of the east coast of Scotland and, within the city, the vibrancy that one would expect from a two-university town.

Hon. Members may be aware that Dundee and Abertay universities recruit their students from furth of the city, of Scotland and of the UK. In considering the proposed legislation on immigration and asylum, I am concerned that no decisions be taken here that weaken the ability of Dundee to retain many of the highly skilled graduates that the city creates and who are required to strengthen Dundee's economy and to stop the decline in the city's population.

I have said that the constituency offers a high quality of life for many. Unfortunately, it has others who suffer from too many of the problems faced by many of our towns and cities. Many of the 45 Bills to be considered in this Session will have an impact on the lives of the people in the city and throughout the constituency. In Dundee, East, male unemployment, at 10 per cent., remains stubbornly high. In a number of wards, large numbers of people remain wholly dependent on benefit and in parts of the city—some of the wards in my constituency—one in three children lives in a household in which no one has a job.

In considering the proposed housing benefit and incapacity benefit legislation, I hope that the measures proposed to allow mobility and to help people back into work are sensitive and offer genuine support for my constituents to get into work. I know that there are many real barriers to people leaving benefit and getting into work, not least the fear of additional debt in the early weeks and months after coming off benefit. I hope

[Stewart Hosie]

that the planned legislation properly addresses the concerns and needs of those seeking to leave benefit and return to work.

I also hope that in making changes in the company law Bill, which is designed to make the creation of a company easier, the Government understand that for ambitious people who are trying to create businesses, it is not the mechanics of starting the firm that are the difficulty, but the lack of access to capital. Indeed, for many ambitious and talented people who have ideas and vision in my constituency, access to capital to start and grow businesses remains almost wholly elusive.

Within the boundaries of Dundee, East, the Black Watch statue stands proudly on Powrie brae as a permanent memorial to the courage and sacrifice of the many men who gave their lives in that old and proud single-battalion regiment. There was great consternation at the time of the announcement of the merger of the Scottish regiments. I am sure that the issue will be raised again, because there remains deep concern at the merger of all Scottish regiments and the treatment of the Black Watch in particular.

The constituency of Dundee, East holds a dear place in the hearts of the Scottish National party. In the Scottish Parliament, the seat is held by Shona Robison, MSP, the SNP shadow Health Minister, who is also my wife. For the 13 years between 1974 and 1987, it was held by Dr. Gordon Wilson, a previous national chairman of the Scottish National party. I have a great deal to live up to.

In his maiden speech on 13 March 1974, Dr. Wilson made a number of suggestions to the then Labour Government. The first was that with North sea oil exploration in its infancy, if investment was made in manufacturing in Scotland, we could live off the benefit of that, exporting skills and products long into the future. Today, with renewable technology in its infancy, I am sure that Dr. Wilson would argue that if the Government support investment in Scottish manufacturing in that sector, we could live off the benefits of exporting skills and products around the world long into the future, so that the natural lottery win of renewable energy—the offshore wind sector in particular—lasts Scotland for a long time indeed.

Dr. Wilson's second suggestion was support for the Hardman report, which called for the dispersal of civil service jobs from the centre. As of June last year, Dundee had only 1 per cent. of the core civil service jobs in Scotland. We remain wholly committed to the dispersal of civil service jobs from the centre. Even though it has been 31 years since we last won a seat from Labour in a general election, the campaign remains as live and valid as it did on 13 March 1974.

Right hon. and hon. Members may be aware that the Dundee, East constituency takes in communities from two local authority areas—Dundee City council and Angus council. I said in my acceptance speech that I intend to serve the constituents of each equally, irrespective of who they voted for, of where they live or of any boundaries. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your time and the House for its consideration. I hope that my contributions in the Chamber and my work in the constituency will allow me to honour that commitment.

8.32 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Stewart Hosie) on his speech. He clearly did his homework. We heard enough to demonstrate that he will be an asset to his party and the Chamber. I also congratulate all other hon. Members who made their maiden contributions.

However, I want to single out one speech that I heard in the course of the five hours or so that I have been listening to the debate. I happen to disagree with almost everything that the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) had to say, but he said it superbly well and demonstrated what a pro he is. He made it clear that this Chamber is the venue for political argument and debate, not the TV studios or the newspapers. He did us all a service by making that contribution.

I welcome the Government's approach to law and order. We have been tough-minded and have ducked none of the difficult decisions. We do not have to take any lessons from the Conservatives on law and order. When they were last in power, the reality was that crime doubled. When their current leader was Home Secretary, he ducked the difficult issues. He blamed his prison chief when things went wrong and dumped on his ministerial colleague when he should have been man enough to stand up and accept the blame. My honest judgment is that the shadow Home Secretary demonstrated today that he is not tough enough to display the leadership skills that are required if he hopes to be Prime Minister or Home Secretary. He has to get off the fence. It is quite simple.

Now, by contrast, our Home Secretary is a consensual politician. He is a man of the utmost integrity and one whom I have been proud to work with. I can say to him clearly and bluntly that whenever he has to take tough decisions, I will back him and support him, even if those decisions are unpopular, because one has to do the right thing when it is required. Saying that, I hope that my ministerial colleagues will recognise that some criticisms that I will make later in my contribution are well intentioned. I make them because I think that they should be heard; they are intended to be constructive.

I want to make a simple observation about the general election: we won the arguments in the general election. It is pure fantasy for a party that gained fewer seats than Michael Foot did in Labour's disastrous 1983 election to claim a partial victory. It is a figment of the Leader of the Opposition's imagination. The scriptwriters for "Doctor Who" could not come up with a better storyline; it is complete and utter nonsense. I have to say—I am angry about it—that the fact that the right hon. and learned Gentleman had the cheek to call our Prime Minister a liar during the election was a disgrace, and it damages the politics of this country. The Leader of the Opposition's whole election campaign was based on spin and fantasy, and the British people rejected it. He should come to terms with that.

I turn now to some key points in the Queen's Speech. I believe that ID cards are right, and the Government will have my total support when the Bill is reintroduced. It is ridiculous that the major Opposition party can attempt to abdicate responsibility on an issue of this importance; it beggars belief. It is absurd for the Liberal Democrats to take an as yet unidentified sum based on

a charging system that they are opposed to and pretend that they would then use it for a different purpose. That is complete and utter nonsense, and you will not be able to get away with it. You said during the election—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough now to realise that when he says "you" he is referring to the Chair.

Steve McCabe: I would not dream of doing that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise.

The Liberal Democrats said during the election that they would use for other policing purposes the money that would, under the current proposals, be spent on the charging base for ID cards. That is a fantasy, and they should not be allowed to get away with it.

The Government should, however, revisit the question of charges and costs for ID cards. There is something fundamentally wrong with a system in which, under the present structure, asylum seekers are virtually being given ID cards, but we are saying that honest, law-abiding British citizens, who will co-operate with a system that the Government say is a good idea, should end up having to pay for it out of their own pockets. That is not right, and I do not think that the British public will tolerate it. I hope that it is not too late to revisit that matter.

On youth crime and community punishment, I have a lot of sympathy with the view of Lord Stevens, the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, but I do not want people punished for a fashion trend. That is ridiculous, but where commercial premises ban or exclude particular types of behaviour because they realise that those are bad for business and for honest, paying customers, they should get our unequivocal support. We should not have any doubts about whose side we are on. If someone wears an item of clothing that is deliberately designed to conceal his identity while he is planning to commit an offence, the courts should take that into account. There should be an additional element of sentencing when someone is guilty of that. We should not duck that issue.

I do not want to see chain gangs of youngsters in orange jumpsuits up and down the country. We have seen enough of people in orange smocks being degraded by their torturers, their jailers and, sometimes, their murderers. We want to get away from that.

What my constituents and I want is good, honest community punishment orders. I want to read in the newspaper the precise details of such orders, just like league tables. I want to know what a person did, what the punishment was and what sort of useful work in the community that person will be doing as restitution for their crime. I want to know why, in God's name, the number of CPOs issued in this country decreased by 4 per cent. between 2002 and 2003. I want to know why only 5.5 per cent. of people convicted of an indictable offence in the west midlands are given a CPO. I want to know why the figure for the west midlands is lower than for the rest of the country. I want to know why, across the country, only 8 per cent. of males and 3 per cent. of females get CPOs for criminal damage offences—the very type of offence that one would expect to attract a CPO. What happens to the third of people who breach a CPO? Why on earth are magistrates allowed to deal with breaches by means of a fine in 46 per cent. of cases, or a further CPO in 28 per cent. of cases? Such people should go to jail, but currently only 12 per cent. do. It is a disgrace. They are laughing at us and we should not tolerate it. Why do we not have league tables for parenting orders and child curfew orders? That is what the public want.

I welcome the comments about guns that I heard today, but it is not good enough to say, as the former Home Secretary said in the foreword to the review:

"We . . . believe that licensing of imitation firearms would be unenforceable."

He is wrong: licensing works in Canada and Australia. If civil servants read the review, they will find that on pages 26 and 27 it describes what has been done in places such as Malta, the Netherlands, California and Connecticut. When someone is pointing a replica gun in one's face, it is not good enough to be told that the civil servants think the problem is too hard to deal with. If we are to tackle such issues, we have to get on with that agenda.

8.42 pm

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow such an impassioned speaker, although as this is my maiden speech, it might be slightly more temperate. To echo what was said of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), I liked the passion, but not many of the sentiments.

It is a humbling experience to stand before the House to make one's maiden speech. Contrary to what hon. Members might have read in *The Times*, I am not a well preserved septuagenarian, born in 1928. My predecessor, Kerry Pollard, was extremely well known in the constituency, where he served for many years as a magistrate and as a councillor. He was an assiduous attendee at local functions. I shall support as many local functions as I can, but I shall work hard to bring my constituents' concerns to the House. I know that, as a loyal supporter of St. Albans for many years, Mr. Pollard truly was aware of its constituents' many concerns. I look forward to articulating those concerns and to speaking out strongly on behalf of St. Albans.

St. Albans has a rich culture and heritage and, with your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall gallop quickly through its history. We learn from history and the history of St. Albans has much to teach us. That history began when the Celts settled in the area: without much regard for the planning regulations of the day, they quickly chucked up a wooden town. The Romans—quick to spot an up-and-coming area—took over and subdued the natives, and Verulamium was born. Queen Boudicca took exception, perhaps because the town had sprung up without planning permission, and she razed it to the ground. However, as they are today, previously developed or brownfield sites were in high demand, and the Romans decided to throw the whole town back up again at greater densities.

Centuries passed and, perhaps as a result of town cramming and the traffic congestion of the day, Roman civilisation declined. People started heading for the countryside. Luckily, there was plenty of countryside in those days for them to head to.

After the Romans, the Saxons invaded. That was about the sixth century. They arrived in Hertfordshire. They took over the site and seventh century Saxons were

[Anne Main]

then converted to Christianity. By the 10th century the abbot, without consulting any locals in the town of St. Albans, decided that it should be enlarged—it is always perilous to decide to enlarge any town without consulting its residents. In a move designed to superheat the area the abbot encouraged new settlers to come, tempting them with material, money and jobs. This unbalanced economic investment in one area led to the inevitable decline of neighbouring Kingsbury, a smaller settlement that did not benefit from the same drive to build and invest by the Government of the day.

The sad decline of Kingsbury led to the town being levelled. Its inhabitants headed off to St. Albans. This was a path-finding initiative of its day. As a result, the old character buildings were razed to the ground and new ones were quickly built in St. Albans for all to fill.

By modern standards, the St. Albans of the day was a rather small settlement. However, what people lacked in numbers they made up for in energy and spirit. The abbot and his agents ruled supreme, often imposing unfair stealth taxes, interfering in the lives of the citizens and, what is worse, micro-managing business and stifling competition. That was outrageous behaviour in its day and it caused much unhappiness. There was bitter quarrelling between the residents. St. Albans had a tetchy time of it during the middle ages.

By 1539, Henry VIII decided that the situation could no longer continue. The power base of the abbey was closed and razed. The townspeople became independent and power was once again returned to a local level. This made the inhabitants extremely happy. St. Albans had its first charter in 1553. Less interference from above meant that the city thrived.

If we jump a few hundred years to the 18th century, St. Albans was well established and a prosperous market town. The Government of the day had appreciated the need to develop a truly sustainable community, and much money had been invested in roads and infrastructure. The London road was built. Travel links to London were good and there were several inns and ale houses. Residents then, unlike residents today, did not seem to be troubled with 24-hour licensing. It seems to have been a pleasant place to live.

The proximity to London and other centres of commerce meant that St. Albans was an attractive place in which to do business, and many industries sprang up locally. In 1836, the first proper police force was formed. Unlike today's police force, it appears that the force was not whisked off to other duties in neighbouring areas. It was on duty, full time, in its neighbourhood, and performed a truly high-visibility local function.

In 1887, St. Albans was made a city. The greatest change came in the 19th century when the railways arrived. There were good links to London, which led to the rapid rise in population and the decline of the stagecoach. The age of the commuter had begun. It took until 1909 for the first buses to arrive. In some areas, the people of St. Albans would say that they still have not arrived. Local villages such as Smallford still find themselves without a decent bus service. Often, residents find themselves experiencing long delays while trying to get from A to B. That is something that we hope will improve.

St. Albans is now a vibrant city with a growing commuter population of more than 18,000. It boasts an international organ festival, a bustling twice-weekly market, numerous historical, archaeological and heritage societies and a spectacular abbey, to name but a few examples of its charms. It is welcoming to many ethnic minority communities, which have positively contributed to the lively and attractive lifestyle that many Albanians enjoy. However, we do not lose sight of the fact that some people are still struggling to find prosperity. House prices are high and there are areas of relative deprivation and poverty.

The city is battling to preserve the best of the old while welcoming the best of the new. Its citizens do not want their city to be preserved in aspic but they do not wish it to be swamped and turned into a faceless commuter suburb of London, devoid of green belt and quality of life.

St. Albans' residents need hospitals and school places. They need the Thameslink 2000 to get started or, more to the point, completed. They need funding. They do not want a £13 million deficit for their local hospital threatening the A and E in Hemel Hempstead to which they have to go. They want to be able to get to the school of their choice and for good schools to be allowed to expand.

Albanians value their villages and their green fields. That is why I welcome in the Queen's Speech Her Majesty's Government's commitment to achieving sustainable development. I hope that it is truly sustainable development. There is support for rural communities—hopefully that does not mean railroading those communities into accepting houses that they do not want—and protection for the natural environment. There is value for the fact that we have beautiful areas surrounding St. Albans. We have natural resources that are in scant supply such as the water resource—the River Ver is in danger of drying up as a result of all the houses that may have to be imposed on the area.

I share the aspirations of Albanians that they will have a beautiful and prosperous environment that is welcoming, with affordable housing and a truly sustainable community. I look forward to holding the Government to account if they do not deliver that sustainability, which has been promised through the Queen's Speech. I look forward also to providing a strong voice for the people of St. Albans and to defending the quality of life that they value. In addition, I look forward to moving the city towards the 21st century while keeping the best of the old and improving the new for the new residents who wish to come and settle in the area, without swamping the established residents who value its heritage.

8.50 pm

Mr. Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is an honour and privilege to follow the impassioned and excellent maiden speech made by the hon. Member for St. Albans (Anne Main). She mentioned Queen Boudicca, and I must say that I can see a lot of similarities. I wish her a long and happy time in the House.

My first wish in this new Parliament is to thank the voters of Hartlepool for returning me as their Member of Parliament for a second time. I congratulate not only

the hon. Member for St. Albans, but all hon. Members who have delivered their maiden speeches both today and in the previous few days. It is just a few short months since I made my maiden speech from this very spot in the Chamber. At the time I was overwhelmed by the kindness shown by hon. Members on both sides of the House, staff and officials. I only hope that I am able to show the same sort of consideration that was shown to me now that I am a parliamentary veteran of some considerable weeks standing.

I have been in the Chamber for all today's debate and most of Thursday's, and several things have struck me: first, how young all the new Members look; and secondly, the high quality of maiden speeches made. The intake of 2005 will be seen as having a major impact on the affairs of the House and the country, as did the intakes of 1945, 1983 and 1997. I wish all new Members well.

The focus of the Queen's Speech on safer communities and continuing to cut crime, antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime is welcome. There is a good story to tell in my constituency. Crime in Hartlepool has gone down by some 22 per cent. in the past 11 months, which is one of the sharpest falls anywhere in the country. Burglary has gone down by a half in little over 12 months. In 1997, burglaries were at an alarming level—something like 270 a month—but the number of burglaries is now down to fewer than 50 a month. The disruption to the supply of class A drugs has increased by some 30 per cent. The fall in crime by more than a fifth equates to 2,900 fewer victims of crime in my town.

Despite all that good news, fear of crime remains. People's perceptions of how safe our streets are have not kept pace with the official statistics. It must be said that that is largely down to kids hanging around on street corners or in shopping precincts. People going about their business who have to walk past those gangs feel extremely intimidated. The risk of actual violence or criminal activity is low, but it is likely that a person might get a bit of lip or some swearing directed at them. Younger people who walk past such gangs face a greater threat of violence than others.

I am not suggesting that there was a golden age of youth when the rain was always warm, the sun shone constantly in summer holidays and adolescents were fully respectful of adults and authority. For example, for relaxation during the election campaign I watched "Quadrophenia", a film by The Who about mods and their battle with rockers in the early 1960s—well before I was born. It is a good film that demonstrates that youth violence has been with us for decades. I remember reading in history classes about punks, and was especially taken by the headline in the *Daily Mirror* at the time about the Sex Pistols: "The Filth and the Fury". Similarly, I was 18 in 1990, when apparently civilisation was about to end with the rise of dance culture and groups such as the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays. It is a natural sign of youth that adolescents will rebel against authority to a degree.

The difference now seems to be that there is a small hard core of youths who have grown up without any apparent acknowledgement of the rules of society—and, yes, with a lack of respect. These kids are 11, 12 or even older, and are taking the mick out of the rest of us. In many cases they are the consequences of generations of unemployment and benefits, and a lack of responsibility. They have not had appropriate parenting and are left to run amok. These kids are not stupid, but refuse to participate in the educational opportunities available to them, and that sort of attitude becomes the acceptable or fashionable stance in the rest of their peer group.

I have seen that myself in my constituency casework—cases in which a kid of 10 is making the lives of an entire street or estate a misery. This kid is not daft. He can manipulate the criminal justice system as astutely as any Philadelphia lawyer, but I can see his life bleakly mapped out now, if his behaviour is not dealt with—breaking windows and setting fire to wheelie bins at 10, petty crime and burglary by 14, a drug habit by the age of 17, more serious crimes and a lifetime of custodial sentences by the time he is 20.

I sincerely hope that this cycle of thuggishness can be halted by the pieces of Home Office legislation outlined in the Queen's Speech. I believe that the legislation will play a part, and I am confident that the three principles to reduce antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime—the three P's: parenting, policing and punishment—will play a major part in the detail of the proposed legislation. I shall consider each of these principles in turn.

As I mentioned, effective parenting is the foundation stone of being a decent citizen, yet for a variety of reasons, in many communities, parenting skills are not embraced or have been eradicated. Some parents do not know the basics, such as how to prepare a nutritious meal. That is why initiatives such as Sure Start, which we as a party do not shout about loudly enough, are so vital. The proposed child care Bill, which will extend children's centres to every community by 2010, is much needed. That will give assistance to parents and provide all children up to the age of 14 with the prospect of safe accommodation in which to learn and play. The work and families Bill will increase scope for parents to stay at home with their children, and that also should be welcomed.

But parenting is much wider than the immediate family unit. Society and its associated organisations also play a role. In the north-east, Cleveland fire brigade has initiated a young firefighters scheme, which takes kids who appear to be heading towards a life of crime and antisocial behaviour and uses the fire service as a role model for discipline, teamwork and social skills. The results are astonishing, with offending and reoffending dramatically reduced. I would like to see such an initiative widened.

We need to be ever bolder and more radical. Ninety-five per cent., if not more, of kids are decent, but may be drawn into gangs and related antisocial behaviour through boredom. I have heard countless times that there is nothing for kids to do and nowhere for them to meet where they feel safe. I urge the Government to be bold in their third term and provide free sports and social facilities for young people. The benefits in terms of reduced antisocial behaviour, less fear in our communities and healthier children would far outweigh the costs. I would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate following the publication of the Green Paper on youth provision later in this Parliament.

Simon Hughes: This is a non-confrontational, supportive question. When I was up in Hartlepool, for

[Simon Hughes]

obvious reasons, last year, one of the big pressures from the youngsters was for a skateboard park near the middle of town so they would not have to be round the war memorial and elsewhere. Can that idea make progress? If the hon. Gentleman needs help, he has only to ask.

Mr. Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. There is a skateboard park in the centre of town, next to the football ground—Hartlepool United is in the play-off finals this Sunday—but it is not used because people do not feel safe there. That is a key issue, on which I am grateful for cross-party support.

The next principle that I mentioned was policing. In this, the Government are heading in the right direction. My constituents want to see the emphasis on neighbourhood and community policing. Neighbourhoods wish to recognise and be able to contact quickly a local police officer who knows the area and the local troublemakers and criminals well, and who is able to police the community effectively. That is already happening in Hartlepool to some extent, with greater numbers of constables and community support officers having a positive effect on people's feelings of reassurance and safety.

However, policing cannot be truly effective unless an appropriate punishment system is in place. People need to see that justice is being done and criminals are being appropriately punished. In many cases, the sentence should be served in the community. I fully agree with moves by the Government to link crimes such as graffiti and damage to the local environment with sentences specifically designed to rectify that crime. Some sort of consistency across the country when sentences are handed out is equally vital. Measures in the Queen's Speech such as the violent crime reduction Bill and the management of offenders and sentencing Bill will help to develop that.

Custodial sentences play a vital role in the justice system, and I was disturbed to read in my briefing pack that with regard to the management of offenders and sentencing Bill, the Sentencing Guidelines Council will take capacity into account when sentencing. That seems to suggest that if the prisons are full, an offender whose crime warrants imprisonment will not go to jail. I hope that I have misinterpreted that passage, which seems to fly in the face of other Government measures, and that my concerns will be dealt with by those on the Treasury Bench.

In general, I support the home affairs measures in the Queen's Speech. They continue to push the criminal justice system towards supporting the victim, and I look forward to debating them in greater detail in the weeks and months to come.

9 pm

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): I compliment the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright) on his witty and thought-provoking contribution to this debate, and the hon. Members who have spoken for the first time today. I am pleased to be called so early in this Parliament to make my maiden speech as Member of Parliament for Clwyd, West.

My predecessor, Gareth Thomas, who won the seat in 1997, was well regarded in the constituency as a conscientious and hard-working Member. He and I are both lawyers and we are on excellent personal terms, despite the result on 5 May. He accepted his defeat with grace and magnanimity, and I wish him and his wife well in whatever the future holds for them.

Clwyd, West is possibly one of the most diverse constituencies in the country, certainly in Wales. It is situated in the very north of Wales, and consists essentially of two parts. The northern, coastal portion is a virtually continuous conurbation stretching from Kinmel bay to Rhos-on-Sea, and there the most predominantly spoken language is English, often infused with the rich vowel sounds of Yorkshire and Lancashire.

The southern part of the constituency is very different in character. Agriculture is still the most important industry, and the language of most of its inhabitants is Welsh. At the heart of this southern area lies the beautiful and historic town of Ruthin. It was there in 1400 that Owain Glyndwr raised his standard, starting a civil war that spread throughout Wales and lasted for the best part of a decade. Glyndwr set fire to Ruthin and only two buildings survived, one of which, Nantclwyd house, is being restored by Denbighshire county council.

Another famous Ruthin building is Sir John Trevor house in Castle street, named after a former Speaker of this House, who in 1695 was accused of accepting a bribe from the City of London and was expelled from Parliament, although remarkably enough he retained his office as Master of the Rolls until his death in 1717, thus demonstrating that in those days at least, higher standards were expected of politicians than of the judiciary.

Ruthin is surrounded by the glorious Vale of Clwyd, dotted with villages, whose very names—Llanynys, Llanychan, Llanarmon yn Iâl, Clawddnewydd, Clocaenog and Cyffylliog—speak to the inherent poetry of the ancient Welsh language. But lest it be thought that I represent some sort of latter-day Arcadia, I should add that my constituency has experienced some difficulties over recent years.

The foot and mouth episode caused devastation to the agricultural and tourist industries, and recovery has been slow. Farmers still wrestle with difficult rules on the disposal of fallen stock, which are impossible to administer in practice, and the six-day movement restriction is causing severe hardship. Those are matters that will have to be addressed by the House. There are also local worries over proposals to close rural schools. The schools in Prion and Rhewl in particular are under threat. I propose to do everything that I can to ensure that those schools survive and thrive.

The largest town in the northern portion of my constituency is Colwyn Bay, which grew up in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a retirement and holiday resort for people primarily from the north-west of England. Colwyn Bay has fallen on hard times recently, although there are some signs of regeneration. Antisocial behaviour is particularly prevalent, and during the recent general election campaign that matter was constantly raised by residents, with many saying that they were concerned about going out after dark.

I consider it outrageous that people do not feel safe on the streets of their own towns, and something needs to be done urgently. The Gracious Speech carries proposals to clamp down on the possession of knives, but I note that we already have a plethora of legislation on the carrying of offensive weapons. It would be more appropriate proactively to enforce the current legislation through high-visibility policing and more police.

Colwyn Bay also has a significant drug problem, which has increased in recent years. The local newspaper recently reported that a white van has been seen cruising about the town selling drugs, much in the manner of an ice cream van. Not unreasonably, that report has caused severe concern to parents of children in the town. Many of my constituents and I believe that downgrading cannabis from class B to class C was ill advised. The Government are examining that decision, and I hope that they have the courage to admit that they were wrong and reverse the measure.

I also note that the Gracious Speech contains a commitment by the Government to

"creating safe and secure communities, and fostering a culture of respect",

about which we have heard so much this afternoon and this evening. That is all well and good, but respect is a process that should move in several directions—most particularly, it should move down from the top. Any Government should show respect to those whom they govern.

I have already mentioned that my constituency is diverse. It is not, perhaps, racially diverse, but it is certainly diverse in terms of culture, language, aspiration and lifestyle. Teenage tearaways who make life unbearable for other people clearly deserve condemnation, but most young people are decent people, and they deserve our respect. We could start showing them respect by recording crimes committed against those under the age of 16 in the British crime survey, because young people are most likely to be the victims of crime at the hands of street thugs.

Older people, perhaps more than any other section of our community, also deserve respect. Council tax rebanding in Wales has caused many of my constituents, who now dread their annual council tax bill, severe financial hardship. More and more pensioners are being forced to resort to means tests, which they find demeaning, and more could be done to make means tests more respectful of those whom they serve.

People in the rural parts of my constituency have recently suffered not only as a result of the foot and mouth episode, which I have mentioned, but at the Government's hands through the ban on fox hunting. Their lives are far removed from those of the Hampstead thinkers who regard fox hunting as anathema. The Burns report was commissioned and then ignored, which also showed a lack of respect. It is time that the Government recognised that the lifestyles of those in rural areas are different, and that the countryside is a place in which people work and live, not simply a place of recreation for city dwellers.

Those who face large-scale developments such as the two wind farms planned for my constituency should also be shown respect. One of those wind farms, the Gwynt-y-Mor wind farm, would be one of the largest offshore wind farms in the world, while the construction of the other might well result in the felling of up to one fifth of Clocaenog forest, where it would be located. The planning regime in this country is such that local residents' representations are largely irrelevant, and a respectful Government would take into account the views of those people whose lives would be fundamentally touched by such developments.

The legislative programme outlined in the Gracious Speech is extensive, and it affects Wales, and therefore my constituency, perhaps more than any other part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Wales announced with some delight that Wales had an unprecedented number of Bills in this Session, and I am sure that the people of Wales are delighted at the superabundance of legislation that is about to be bestowed upon them. That programme must receive support where it deserves it; it must be challenged, where appropriate; and it must always be carefully and closely scrutinised. I consider it a great privilege to be entrusted with those tasks by the electors of Clwyd, West.

9.10 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I pay tribute to the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Jones), who was a passionate advocate for his constituency. I knew his predecessor, to whom he paid a gracious tribute, well. The hon. Gentleman spoke on several issues that relate to his constituency but have national implications. I have no doubt that he has a distinguished future in this House.

Listening to him—indeed, listening to every one of today's maiden speeches—prompted me to think how deeply rooted Members become, often very rapidly, in their constituencies. That led me on to a further thought—that those who would dabble with the method by which people are elected to this House should consider the implications carefully, and perhaps read this debate, which exemplifies the importance of the constituency link. This House can take great pride in the strength of that deeply rooted link between the individual Member and his or her constituency. It has been exemplified by all those who today spoke for the first time in this House and I pay tribute to every one of them.

A second thought occurred to me as I listened to the debate, prompted by, among others, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Edward Miliband), who is my neighbour. I knew his father well in the 1970s, and it makes me feel old to remember my hon. Friend and his brother as much younger than they are now. I was reminded of the extent to which Members of this House come from a diversity of backgrounds. My mother's family came to this country from pogroms against Russian Jews. Many Members have similar backgrounds. The father of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North graced the intellectual life of this country—he was a prominent European intellectual and a great man—and his sons will grace the House in representing their constituencies. That made me think how foolish was the policy to have a numerical cap on the number of people who should be allowed into this country, which would have been implemented had the Conservatives had their way. Many of the people who went on to enter this House, or whose children and grandchildren did so, might well have been prevented from coming here.

[Jon Trickett]

I want to make a few points about the Queen's Speech, but will try to curtail them in view of the fact that there are still Members wishing to speak. The first relates to incapacity benefit, which affects many households in my constituency. In Streethouse, for example, more than 60 per cent. of households have somebody, often the prime earner, on long-term sickness or incapacity benefit, often as a result of working in the mining industry. I am pleased that the Government have agreed the massive compensation package that has been debated in this House many times. About £70 million has been paid to people who have long-term illnesses as a result, frankly, of the negligence of the National Coal Board. It is a fabulous and welcome programme. Many of those men have been on incapacity benefit for 20 years, since the pits closed, and some for longer than that.

I do not believe that the villages that I represent will regenerate fully until larger numbers of people earn an income. If we can persuade people off incapacity benefit, that will be a good step towards helping to bring about regeneration. I hope that we shall do that through enticement rather than coercion. I received private assurances from the previous Secretary of State that the Government would want to continue in that way. On that basis, I believe that a consensus can be achieved with people such as me.

Let us briefly consider the health service. In most hon. Members' constituencies, the local hospital plays an important role and is a valued asset to the people whom we represent. In my constituency, there are two hospitals, Pinderfields and Pontefract, both of which are receiving much needed investment from the Labour Government. They are also undergoing massive change, some of which will inevitably impose some strains. Doubtless, the doctors, nurses, technicians and administrators will do their best to ensure that there are centres of excellence in both parts of the constituency. However, I am slightly worried about the announcement only hours after the election that we will now put 1.7 million operations into the private sector.

If that initiative is about increasing overall capacity, I have no problem with it because it means that some of my constituents will receive operations earlier, but if, as I fear, the effect is somehow to cream off capacity from the national health service—mathematically, it is hard to understand how else it can happen—that is an entirely different matter. Any sign of a reduction in NHS capacity either at Pontefract or Pinderfields as a result of a decision to outsource to what the Government choose to call the independent sector would be most regrettable and meet resistance from my constituents. I would feel that they were justified in resisting such proposals. I shall therefore examine carefully the precise way in which the policy rolls out.

I want briefly to mention city academies. In a place such as London, where millions of people live cheek by jowl, and high schools are close together—perhaps only a mile or a mile and a half apart—a choice agenda may well be an appropriate way in which to structure public services. However, in an area such as mine, which has 24 separate villages with only four secondary schools, the choice agenda is meaningless, especially when there is little co-ownership and poor public transport and highways infrastructure. The capacity of parents and young people for exercising choice is limited simply through geography and the dispersed nature of the communities that I represent. It is therefore hard to understand how a programme that effectively means the construction of 200 schools at £5 billion can be offered as a panacea for the whole country.

One could almost use the term "bog-standard". A bog-standard regime—I use the term advisedly—will be implemented throughout the country, irrespective of the heterogeneity of the various communities that comprise it. The initiative needs to be examined in the greatest detail if the Government are to demonstrate that it is not an ideological imposition from above. They must produce some evidence, which does not currently exist, to show that the policy will work across the broad range of communities that make up this country.

I know that other hon. Members wish to speak, so although I had more to say, I shall conclude my remarks.

9.18 pm

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): As possibly the last speaker this evening to make a maiden speech, I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. They have been interesting, principled and often humorous. I should also like to extend my sympathies to those who still wait.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech on the day that we discuss home affairs and communities because I believe that campaigning on local issues that are dear to the hearts of Solihull people has got me here today. Indeed, I am immensely grateful for being here at all, having overturned a majority of more than 9,400 votes and won by the slender majority of only 279. I am the first ever Liberal Democrat to have the honour of representing the people of Solihull, and the first ever woman Liberal Democrat to be elected to the House from the west midlands. That is a great honour, and a responsibility that I do not take lightly.

While I am personally very grateful to be here, I am also mindful of the fact that the majority of the constituents of Solihull did not vote for me. Indeed, as a proportion of the electorate, even fewer electors voted for this Government. In the interests of fairness and the desire for every voter to feel that their vote counts, I am disappointed that no time in this parliamentary Session has been allocated to discuss the issue of fair votes.

It is appropriate on this occasion for me to mention my predecessor, Mr. John Taylor, who served the people of Solihull in this place for 22 years. Before that, he was a Member of the European Parliament, and prior to that he was a local councillor. That is a fantastic record of service to his community and I am sure that all Members will join me in wishing Mr. Taylor a happy and healthy retirement in his beloved Solihull. Indeed, only three Members have served the people of Solihull in Parliament since the borough was created in 1945, serving an average of 20 years each. I hope that I can also look forward to a long term of service, although 20 years could, in all probability, qualify me for the exalted position of Mother of the House.

Home affairs and communities are hugely important to the people of Solihull. Our motto is "Urbs in Rure", which, for the non-classically trained such as myself,

means "town in the country". Solihull sits on the south-east boundary between Birmingham and the Warwickshire countryside. Some people, particularly in the west midlands, have an image of Solihull as a place where posh people live. It is a much sought-after place to live, but I can tell the House that there is a lot more to Solihull than being posh. Within the constituency, there are the strong communities of Shirley, to the west, and Olton, Lyndon and Elmdon to the north. At its heart is Silhill—Solihull's people as a whole are sometimes referred to as Silhillians—and St. Alphege, which was named after a local nobleman who refused to allow a ransom to be paid after he was kidnapped. He was beaten to death with mutton bones by his kidnappers.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you can see that the people of Solihull do not like to be messed with. They also care passionately about their environment. I have mentioned our motto, "Urbs in Rure". A key issue in Solihull—and, I am sure, elsewhere—is the continuing urbanisation of our increasingly few green spaces. In a nutshell, there is too much urbs and not enough rure. Parkland throughout the borough is being sold off for development to fund capital projects and regeneration. What right has a local authority to sell off our children's green heritage? When that green space has gone, it has gone for ever. That is not all. Our lovely old, sometimes historic, buildings are also falling into the hands of developers who seem to capitalise on every inch to erect blocks of luxury flats, which are destroying the very character of our communities, and the very quality that makes people proud to be Silhillians.

Faced with these developers, our local council is hamstrung by central Government's planning guidance rules, which do little to provide the starter homes in Solihull that would enable our children to stay in our community when they grow up. If our local council turns a developer's application down, it runs the risk of being taken to court and not only having the decision reversed but having to pay the developer's costs as well as its own, which simply adds insult to injury. People feel powerless, and they are. Successive Conservative and Labour Governments have stripped local authorities of many of their powers to make decisions for their communities. We want communities to have as much power as possible to make decisions for themselves.

If I can achieve one thing for the people of Solihull, it will be to help to restore the balance and give local people more of a say, particularly in the planning decisions that shape their environment and ultimately their lives.

9.25 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): By my calculation, we have had 15 maiden speeches this evening, to most of which I have had the privilege of listening. It would take up most of my allocated time were I to comment on all of them, and in order not to show too much favouritism towards one Member or another, I shall not do so. I want to compliment all of you, however, on the confidence with which you have spoken, and the speed with which you have taken to the task. I have checked with one of my hon. Friends and calculated that when we entered Parliament we did not manage to make our maiden speeches until at least July. I commend you all highly. I congratulate particularly my new neighbour, the hon. Member for Solihull (Lorely Burt), on making her maiden speech this evening, and thank her for paying tribute to my colleague, John Taylor. I am sure that when he reads *Hansard* he will appreciate the reference to his 22-year record in this place.

I also pay tribute to the tone with which you have made your maiden speeches. It was rather better—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given the hon. Lady a little leeway, but she has been using the second person when she should be using the third person in referring to other hon. Members.

Mrs. Spelman: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I was just about to say that the tone of new hon. Members' speeches was rather better than the intemperate tone adopted by the Home Secretary in his outburst at the start of this debate, which showed little evidence of the respect which the Prime Minister has commended to all of us as parliamentarians.

Let me start by congratulating the Minister of Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband), on his promotion to the Cabinet. I wonder whether there could be two of us shadowing the Deputy Prime Minister now. I had to seek a little clarification of the roles of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Communities and Local Government, and fortuitously, this evening, I have received a letter from the Prime Minister containing a press notice explaining the Deputy Prime Minister's new roles. Apparently, he will have a diplomatic role representing the UK abroad and a formal role promoting the interests of the north across Government. That press notice, however, is dated 6 May, and my understanding from press reports this afternoon is that the responsibility for local elections has in fact passed today to the Department for Constitutional Affairs. So rather than an Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, perhaps we have an office of diminishing responsibilities.

I wish the Minister well, particularly in breaking down the silo mentality of Departments, which hinders regeneration. He could begin by simplifying the 48 different funding streams available for regeneration. He will have our support if he can encourage a more flexible approach.

Why, after eight years in power, have the Government suddenly decided to appoint a Minister of Communities? Could it be that after four weeks of real engagement with communities, the Government have discovered that communities feel ignored, dictated to and trampled on by their zeal for centralisation? In fairness, the word "communities" did come up in the previous Parliament, mostly in relation to the so-called sustainable communities plan. The sense of being dictated to, however, was nowhere more apparent than in that grand house-building scheme. I remember visiting the Essex village of Roydon, which is faced with a threefold increase in size as a result of a decision of the unelected East of England regional assembly, against the wishes of the villagers and their local representatives. This sense of disempowerment is undermining community spirit. The word "sustainable" has been tacked on to "communities", and it could not be further

[Mrs. Spelman]

from the truth for a community that is certainly not being offered a threefold increase in its infrastructure to go with the imposition of new homes.

The mismatch between house building and the environment's capacity to cope with it is the main reason why the Conservative party opposed the sustainable communities plan. The one exception is the Thames Gateway project, most of which involves building on brownfield land. The Government's plans to concrete over the south-east of England are unsustainable, as the Environmental Audit Committee has made clear. I implore the Government, rather than simply imposing more and more housing demands on a part of the country that is already suffering in terms of both infrastructure and environment, to take a more holistic look at why we have migration to the south and east, and why we are not achieving more balanced economic growth across the country.

I speak, of course, as a midlands MP. Areas throughout the midlands and the north would embrace an opportunity for growth. Have we learned nothing from the 1960s demolition process that gave birth to concrete tower blocks? The Government plan to demolish no fewer than 400,000 Victorian terraces to combat crime.

It is not just the strategy that undermines communities, it is the use of regionalisation as a means of delivering it that is so damaging. The Deputy Prime Minister's obsession with regionalisation is deeply at odds with the needs of the community. Taking power away from local government and giving it to regional bodies further removed from the locality is deeply unpopular. Even after the resounding rejection of a north-east regional assembly last autumn, the Deputy Prime Minister said stubbornly that he was not giving up on the regional dimension, and he clearly meant it. Since November, we have seen more powers removed from local government and given to regional bodies. The matters over which they have control range from the critical, such as the soon-to-be-announced regional fire control rooms, to the bureaucratic, in the form of regional tobacco strategies. In addition we have regional waste incineration strategies, regional house-building targets, regional planning, regional housing boards and regional transport boards.

Bypassing local government means bypassing local people and local communities. Communities are strong when they feel empowered and safer when they feel stronger. The signs of the weakening of community safety are all around us. Graffiti, swearing in the street and vandalism are all symptomatic of a lack of consideration for others, but such actions often go well beyond lack of consideration. Late-night drunken behaviour has gone beyond being merely embarrassing. It is now sinister, intimidating and often violent, and it is commonplace. Bit by bit, we are surrendering our town centres to the yobs when night falls, and allowing them to become a social wasteland. I have a 14-year-old daughter, and the prospect of letting her go into the centre of Birmingham at night would fill me with trepidation.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes articulated a vision of society in which life was

"solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short".

A glance through some of the late-night CCTV footage in many of our town centres conjures up images not far short of that. For the first time there are now 1 million violent crimes a year, and half of them are alcohol-related. The financial cost is put at £12 billion a year; the social cost is almost incalculable.

My worry is that the Government have accelerated that trend with the rush to introduce late-night licences in existing pubs and bars, and the obstructions that they have created for communities seeking to oppose applications for new licences. I understand that a number of arguments can be advanced in favour of more flexibility on licensing hours, but the Government's approach involves an in-built presumption in favour of extended-licence applications and new applications. Not only is that unfair to the communities affected, but it defies the practical realities of how communities can serve the needs of 24-hour opening.

In London, for example, I am not convinced that we have the necessary public transport capacity to convey people safely to and from clubs and bars at all hours of the night. That is an issue especially for women. However, not all crime is alcohol derived. More and more is drug fuelled and many acts of yobbery are a symptom of boredom, a lack of social opportunity and a lack of self-respect. Often, that manifests itself on our housing estates and around urban shops.

There are myriad ways in which the construction of communities themselves can be instrumental in reducing crime. Much research has been undertaken to see how crime can be designed out of new housing estates, but the depressing truth is that the design of 21st century estates seems to have ignored the lessons of 1960s architecture, where rat runs and concealed areas create havens for crime. The research shows how simple things, ranging from the construction of cul-de-sacs to limit-escape routes to the provision of parking spaces outside people's homes so that owners can keep an eye on their cars, are all effective in developing safer communities.

The fact that the Queen's Speech puts the accent on safer communities is an admission that people do not feel safe in their homes and when they leave their homes. The Prime Minister acknowledged that and said that we need more visible uniformed individuals on the street, but he stopped short of saying police. Is that because the Government have run out of money to provide the real McCoy—beat bobbies with the power of arrest? As the deputy chief constable of north Wales put it:

"Community Support Officers offer 10% of the powers for about 90% of the cost".

Hon. Members may like to know that, if all the increase in the police precept had been used for police since 1997, there would be 15,000 more police on the streets by now.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I say how popular the police community support officers are in my constituency? Indeed, members of the Glebe Court residents association are so thrilled with the improvement in their quality of life because of their PCSOs that they have suggested to other residents and tenants associations that they campaign for them, too. I

urge the hon. Lady, therefore, not to suggest that they are not a great benefit to local people, because they certainly are in Mitcham and Morden.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but the point that I am making is the important one made by the police professionals: it costs virtually the same to put police community support officers on the street as police officers, but they do not have the power of police officers. Perhaps we should reflect on the short-term approach that the Government have adopted to the problem of safer communities.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): Rather than bestowing more power on police community support officers or even trying to get more of them, why do we not give more power to police specials? In Bournemouth, for example, only one third of the specials quota has been met, yet all the police community support officers to whom I have spoken would be delighted to get rid of their uniform and become special constables were they to be given a salary. If we give those people a salary, we will have people who are trained and have the power of arrest, unlike police community support officers, which is policing on the cheap. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs. Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Labour Members should not mock the role of the specials. It should not be forgotten that the specials work voluntarily.

I wanted to make a point about community safety and the danger of taking a short-term view. Central Government funding for four out of five community safety warden schemes ran out on 31 March this year. That kind of gimmick does no good to communities. I wonder who criminals thought the real fools were the following day.

As the legislative programme unfolds, the country will be watching with interest to see what measures the Government will put in place to address the growing crisis in housing affordability. So soon after you urged Ministers to make their announcements in Parliament rather than through the media, Mr. Speaker, the drip-feed news over the weekend of the Government's shared equity proposals plainly ignored this advice. Why did they not use the occasion of the Queen's Speech to announce their shared equity proposals tonight? In any event, the announcement will pre-empt their consultation period on the homebuy scheme, which is due to run until the end of September.

There is also a serious omission from the Queen's Speech: the lack of measures to tackle the shameful rise in homelessness. I look forward to hearing what action the Government will take on homelessness and on creating communities that are safe, sustainable and socially cohesive.

9.40 pm

The Minister of Communities and Local Government (Mr. David Miliband): It is a privilege to wind up today's debate and I thank the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for her kind words and for the tenor of her contribution. Members will know that the Government's general election manifesto promised opportunities more equal and communities more secure. Those aspirations are at the heart of the Queen's Speech, and I am pleased to say that they were at the heart of today's debate.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out how the Government plan to build on the successes of police, courts and local councils in tackling crime and antisocial behaviour, as well as to take forward proposals on asylum and immigration. Debate on some aspects of the proposals will no doubt be fierce, but today's debate has shown that there is room for more unity across parties and—dare I say it?—within parties as well.

In respect of affordable housing, efficient planning, tackling poverty and improving local services and local democracy, the ministerial team in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will be working, under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister, to extend the opportunity on which strong communities depend. I shall set out our agenda of action tonight, but I am first able to congratulate new Members on their maiden speeches. In fact, I counted 16 such speeches, rather than the 15 that the hon. Member for Meriden mentioned. You will be pleased to hear, Mr. Speaker, that those speeches have been delivered with great modesty when the content required no modesty at all, and with great respect for the traditions of the House, notably in the generous tributes paid by all such Members to their predecessors.

Two themes have dominated today's debate: civic pride, and pride in roots. We have learned a lot about our country today: about the hat industry in Denton and Reddish; about the racing industry in Newbury; about the marine heritage of Portsmouth; about the lifeboats of Bridgend; about the manufacturing industry of Dudley, North; about the biscuits of Reading; about the Olympics that are coming to West Ham; about tourism in Colwyn bay; about the universities of Dundee—the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Stewart Hosie) is in his place—and about the history of Albanians. The whole House will doubtless know that the story of Albanians is of course the story of St. Albans. We have also learned that castles for the masses are available in Windsor at the Legoland factory—I am sorry that the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) is not in place—and about the posh, and not so posh, parts of Solihull. I congratulate all those Members.

As I said, there has been a second theme in today's debate, following the outstanding speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman). The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) explained that although his predecessor changed parties—quite often—the hon. Gentleman will not be changing his Polish name and I congratulate him on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan) spoke of his pride in his immigrant roots, and the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Susan Kramer) and for Rochdale (Paul Rowen) spoke about the diversity of their constituencies. I hope that I can also mention that in a House of Commons tour de force, the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) not only remembered each of the maiden speeches that had come before; he also reminded his party that firmness without fairness is no basis for immigration policy. The Conservative Front Bench's loss is the House's gain.

[Mr. David Miliband]

I hope that the House will not mind if I say that I paid special attention to the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Edward Miliband). I am grateful to the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson) for noting the special pride that I felt on hearing the words of my hon. Friend. His speech carried the passion and insight that I would expect of my younger brother, and it confirmed very clearly that after the birth of a first child, parents should not be discouraged. It is wise to proceed on the maxim that if at first you don't succeed, try again.

I hope that the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) will not mind if I say that we were disappointed that we were not able today to hear from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather). We look forward to her debut on the Front Bench and we all wish her well in her attempt to disentangle her leader from the local income tax.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) has been a Member of this House for 18 years, but his speech was also a maiden in one respect; his first on the campaign trail for the Conservative leadership.

Chris Bryant: He has been trying for years.

Mr. Miliband: There is certainly a place for my hon. Friend in my speech-writing team.

Having survived decapitation by the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden must feel ready for the decapitation strategy launched by the leader of his own party. However, I have to say that, this time, Brian Sedgemore will not be there to save the day for him.

David Davis: How do you know?

Mr. Miliband: Having changed parties, Mr. Sedgemore may still be ready to ride to the rescue.

I know that, in recent months, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden has got used to the gentle style, good manners and straight talking of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I suggest, in a spirit of comradeship, that the right hon. Gentleman be more wary when he goes into battle with the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who we understand from the newspapers has been in America taking lessons on negative campaigning in primary contests. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to be careful.

John Bercow: Terrifying!

Mr. Miliband: The hon. Gentleman says he is terrified. His card has been marked by the hon. Member for Woodspring; I do not think that he is a supporter.

Without opportunity, security and democracy, there is no community; the hon. Member for Meriden and I would agree on that. In the last eight years, the Government have worked to put those foundations of community in place. The opportunity to work has been extended to more than 2 million people; the opportunity of home ownership has been extended to more than 1 million; the opportunity to make up for failed education has been extended to 750,000 people without basic skills. The security that comes from a local police team has been extended by 13,000 extra police officers. The security of decent housing has been extended to 1 million social housing tenants. The security of effective local services has been extended by investment and reform of local public services.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why, in eight years of Labour government, fewer than 3,000 council houses have been built, whereas in the first eight years of the Thatcher Government, 350,000 council houses were built?

Mr. Miliband: I would be happy to go into the situation in detail with the hon. Gentleman, but my understanding of the situation is that the receipts from council house sales have been put into upgrading existing properties, which in large part explains why house building has not been as high as the hon. Gentleman might expect. However, house building levels this year are higher than at any stage since 1991. I hope that we can find common cause at least on that issue. The fact that the social housing budget is doubling to £2 billion is something on which the hon. Gentleman should congratulate the Government, rather than condemn us.

The democracy that comes from clear leadership of local government, and from locally elected mayors and the cabinet system, about which we heard today, and the democracy that is enhanced—here I agree with the hon. Member for Meriden—by the devolution of power from town hall to neighbourhoods, as well as from Government to the town hall; all of this is happening around out country.

Several hon. Members mentioned housing. The needs are indeed diverse. Rough sleeping is down by 70 per cent. and interest rates have been halved from the levels of the 1980s, and house building numbers in 2004 are higher than at any stage since 1991. But we recognise the challenges, too; notably for first-time buyers trying to get into the housing market and for council tenants wanting home improvements. I believe that there is room for serious discussion in this House about how to help these diverse groups.

But I say in all candour to Opposition Members that they cannot complain about the lack of affordable housing while denouncing plans for new building as the end of civilisation as we know it. The hon. Member for Meriden said that she opposed house building in the south-east but the Tory election manifesto for London says that they will continue to support the Thames gateway elements of the sustainable communities plan. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Meriden will contain her enthusiasm, I will explain why I raised this point.

The hon. Lady also said that she wanted to shift the burden of house building to the midlands, where she is a representative. However, her election leaflet has four cases of when she will oppose house building in her constituency. I urge her to practise consistency on these issues.

Mrs. Spelman: I made it clear that we support the Thames Gateway project because 80 per cent. of it is on

brownfield sites. I made the case in my election leaflet for brownfield redevelopment, of which there is plenty in the midlands to be going along with.

Mr. Miliband: I look forward to these debates because I have comments from the hon. Lady who said that the Thames Gateway project is not sustainable and promised that there was no question of it going ahead under the Conservatives.

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): Perhaps I can drag the right hon. Gentleman away from the spat with the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, fun though it is.

The Minister mentioned various aspects of tackling the housing crisis, but when will the Government introduce the secondary legislation promised in the Housing Act 2004 to deal with the problem of empty homes? There are an estimated 700,000 such properties. They are a blight on our communities, and we are trying to deal with regeneration. Not only that, however, they are a scandal when so many people, who are desperate to be housed, are languishing on council lists in complete misery.

Mr. Miliband: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that and congratulate her on getting into the debate even though she did not get the chance to make a full speech. She mentions the importance of the council housing stock in respect of empty homes. I think she will agree that 550,000 of the 700,000 empty homes are not in the council sector, but in the private sector. The problem involves complex issues. I am happy to take them up with her, but it is not as simple as saying that 700,000 council homes are empty.

I hope we can agree that we need to increase the supply of housing as well as help those who are trying to get on the housing ladder. The recommendations of the Barker review laid out a clear economic and social agenda in respect of housing supply. We will respond to that report in the course of the year.

The plans for four growth areas are in full swing, and I am pleased if we have the support of the Opposition Front-Bench team on that. The programme to release public sector land for housing is under way. Planning reform is delivering faster decisions. We are determined to move the housing debate forward, not just on the supply side, but on the demand side, too.

For first-time buyers, for key workers in our public services and for those on modest incomes renting from a council or the housing association sector, we believe that it is right to make home ownership more affordable. That is why in January my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister set out in his five-year plan for housing the benefit of shared equity schemes. In April, we published a major consultation paper "HomeBuy—expanding the opportunity to own", which set out detailed proposals to extend the scheme. It also outlined the outcome of discussions with the Council of Mortgage Lenders on exciting proposals for those private mortgage lenders to extend equity loans to first-time buyers buying on the open market. We want to explore with the CML extending the scheme to new build homes, which would allow us to help more people into home ownership. I would have thought that that would have support on both sides of the House.

On regeneration, Labour believes that good housing and social regeneration must go together. It is people, not houses, who make communities. That is why the Government are committed, in every part of the country, to extend the drive to tackle anti-social behaviour—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden is welcome to intervene. Measures include neighbourhood policing teams, closed circuit television, neighbourhood wardens, which are making an outstanding contribution to safety in our communities, the determination to close crack houses and to crack down on drug dealing, and clear powers for local authorities in respect of neighbourly behaviour. We should be looking for Conservative support for licensing legislation and the powers that it will give local councils to take account of local views on such issues. However, as several hon. Members said, there is another side of the coin. The commitment to high-quality youth services, the commitment to sports, leisure and arts facilities, the after-school clubs and voluntary sports leagues, and the employment measures to tackle worklessness are essential to make a difference to young and sometimes aimless lives.

In 88 of the most disadvantaged local authority districts, the Government have a specific programme to send a clear message. We will extend rights through investment, but we want to promote responsibility, too. Eight years ago, social exclusion was not recognised on the Floor of the House. Now, employment rates and educational standards are rising faster in those 88 neighbourhood renewal areas than the national averages. Eight years on, I hope that the whole House can commit fully to ensure that we never again have a minority of the country that is cut off from the mainstream, with disadvantages in housing, employment, education and income piled on top of each other, creating misery from one generation to the next.

Simon Hughes: The Minister said that he supported the youth service. Will he also pick up the idea, which was put forward today by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright) and is widely supported, that if young people are to do positive things, sport facilities have to be affordable for them, which in many parts of Britain they are not?

Mr. Miliband: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I do not know whether he is raising a London-specific issue, but the creation of high-quality sports facilities—"sports" being broadly defined—is essential. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hartlepool."] The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) was raising a specific point to which I was responding. I visited my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool in his constituency to help to campaign for him. As a local councillor he did an awful lot to promote high-quality, affordable sporting facilities, and I glad to back him in that drive.

All these aspirations, from housing to antisocial behaviour and youth services, require a strong partnership between central and local government. The best of local government can teach central Government and the private sector a thing or two about how to meet complex demands, and it is vital that the best practice is spread across the whole of local government. On Friday, I met the council leaders and chief executives of

[Mr. Miliband]

England's eight biggest cities outside London. Incidentally, all three political parties were represented, and there was an independent. I found common ground about the challenges—a tough global economy, rising demands on public services and citizens wanting more say. Yet I found, too, common ground on the solutions—the importance of education, including higher education, the need to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, the key role of public-private partnership and the importance of transport links.

Eight years ago, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister talked about his vision of urban renaissance. Around the country that renaissance is evident today. The Conservative party may not have many MPs in our big cities, but I suggest that its members pay them a visit. Central Government have an important role to play, promoting local leadership at local level, providing the right incentives for service improvement, supporting new models for the devolution of power to neighbourhoods and backing strategic projects, from the Bristol harbourside to the Sage in Gateshead, which breathe confidence into towns and cities. This we are determined to do.

Central Government also have an important partnership with local government in respect of local government finance. We share responsibility with local government for raising public money. I am pleased, as, I hope, is the whole House, about the 33 per cent. increase in grants to local government since the election of this Government in 1997. We share responsibility, too, for driving over £6 billion of efficiency savings through the system as part of the Gershon agenda—another area in which there is room for cross-party co-operation. We also share responsibility for ensuring a disciplined and effective approach to council tax. We look forward to the report of the Lyons review in December to help shape a national debate about the best method of raising local government finance.

We have had an excellent debate today on the themes of equal opportunities and strong communities. The Government believe that there is such a thing as society, and it finds tangible form in our diverse communities, from quiet villages to busy cities. Across Britain, the Queen's Speech has made clear, there is a renewal of civil pride, as the silent majority of citizens who want to live well together stand up for their vision of a thriving village, town or city. Those communities are made by people, not Government, but we are determined to do all that we can to help, and in the months and years ahead that is what we will do. I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

Debate adjourned.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

School Meals

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell]*

9.58 pm

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): As my new regional Whip may find out, I am an unregenerate non-conformist. This was especially true in my formative decade, the 1960s. I was a Rolling Stones fan when most were following the Beatles, a cyclist in the Peak district when my peers were on scooters to the east coast and, most shocking of all, I loved school meals when my classmates moaned constantly about them.

Today, as then, school meals can make an important contribution to the daily nutritional intake of young people. They can promote growth and development through access to a varied and balanced diet. They can protect health by minimising risks of physical and mental illnesses. They can improve concentration and help to fulfil potential, both inside and outside school.

But what has gone wrong? Tomorrow will be the first anniversary of the tabling of early-day motion 1256 by the former Member for Stourbridge, who will be remembered in this place as a superb and vigilant campaigner on children's issues. Her motion noted that there was—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Heppell.]*

David Taylor: The early-day motion noted that there was

"a crisis in children's diet-related health",

shown by the levels of obesity among children and the appearance in young people of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, which were previously confined to adults.

In the past 12 months or so, the issue has risen rapidly up the political agenda. It is rare for a TV celebrity publicly to defend any of the founding policies of the welfare state, but in his powerful Channel 4 series "Jamie's School Dinners", Jamie Oliver did just that, and he is to be congratulated on doing so. Something has to be done if we are to arrest the upward trend in poor diet and obesity among children that we have seen over the past decade and the knock-on effects that it will have on future educational achievement and avoidable national health service costs. For example, in 2002 16 per cent. of boys and girls aged two to 15 were obese and almost a third—30 per cent.—were either overweight or obese. Ominously, rates of physical activity are declining. The facts are bleak.

It is no surprise that the companies currently contracted to cater for schoolchildren and those who sell to that market have been quick to highlight the variety of initiatives and programmes that they have introduced to promote healthy food in schools—coincidentally, since "Jamie's School Dinners" first aired.

Private contractors are, of course, just reacting to the existence of a private market, and they can only be expected to act in a way that maximises their profits for their shareholders, whatever the sector in which that

market operates—a market created by the Conservative Government in 1980. Their catastrophic legislation released local education authorities from their obligation under the Education Act 1944 to provide school meals for all children, and swept away all nutritional considerations for the minority who, because of low parental income, would have to rely on an underfunded, undervalued and 'stigmatised free school meals service. That came on the heels of the infamous cessation of free school milk, and it was clear that the then new Government were intent on carving up as much of the state school meals service as possible without causing alarm among their shire supporters, but enough to have thrusting free marketers salivating at the prospect of public sector catering contracts free from any inconvenient statutory demands regarding nutritional content.

A cynic might observe that as the nation's palate has grown more sophisticated and the adult consumer more health conscious, schoolchildren have softened the blow to the profits of the companies that produce the processed, reclaimed, reformulated foods that are advertised so heavily during children's TV programming. Commercial confidentiality enables the proposition to be kept fact-free. Unison, the Caroline Walker Trust, the National Union of Teachers, Sustain, the Welsh Food Alliance and the Soil Association have long campaigned to restore statutory minimum standards of nutrition in the provision of school food. Sadly, the current reality is a patchwork provision where price is paramount. Children's health—and as a consequence, educational outcomes—are thus subordinated to free market principles and a postcode lottery.

None the less, the Government are to be applauded for their aims in respect of nutritious school food and healthy eating, which predate Jamie Oliver's campaign for changes to the purchasing, preparation and nutritional value of school food. The healthy living blueprint for schools accelerated the demise of those speechless dispensers of high-sugar, high-salt products, vending machines. I pay tribute to the work of the former Members for Stourbridge and for Croydon, Central and to the Food in Schools Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), but even though the removal of sponsors' names from the covers and the greater promotion of fruit are welcome developments, there is still a long way to go to remove the dietary scourge of vending machines completely.

The breakfast club initiative has provided thousands of pupils with one of the most important meals of the day—and regularly—whereas previously those same young people started the school day with their cognitive faculties impaired.

The Department of Health national school fruit scheme from 2000 has conveyed the importance of eating fruit to the under-16s. The creation of the national healthy school standard is already bringing some improvement to the nutritional standard of school food with the long-term aim of reducing rates of childhood obesity.

My local educational authority is doing much good work. In North-West Leicestershire, 16 primary and five secondary schools are working towards the national healthy school standard. Achievement of that status depends partly on the contents of vending machines on the school site. That is a particularly welcome criterion.

Latterly, the school food trust and the school meals review panel have been established to help both parents and food nutritional experts develop healthy menus for schools that offer healthy food choices that children will eat. The trust will also offer the sort of independent advice on food and nutrition that many school heads and their catering staff have long asked for. Indeed, the principal of Ibstock community college, of which I am a governor, Bill Kelly, made that very request for independent information on nutrition. I am pleased that the Government are putting together a programme to satisfy that need, and to empower schools with the knowledge that they need to cater successfully for their pupils.

I am also encouraged by the recent statement by the chair of both the school food trust and the school meals review panel, Suzi Leather, who has said in relation to the work ahead of her:

> "No one should live a shorter or an unhealthier life because they ate school food. No child should disrupt their and others' learning because they are hungry and cannot concentrate. No child should leave school knowing only how to open a packet or tin. No child should be bamboozled into eating a diet which harms them. Standards for school food should be the best that we can do, not the least we can get away with."

These are laudable sentiments, which I am confident enjoy the support of the whole House, including even those veteran Conservative Members who voted for the 1980 Act, the effect of which continues to impair the skills mix of our economy, and will probably continue to do so for the next decade.

The Government should accept that despite the restoration of national nutrition standards in April 2001, school meals remain a dangerously neglected aspect of education policy. Dietary junk is still routinely served to our children. We must ensure that the £280 million allocated before the general election reaches children in the form of better food from their school kitchens, and is not swallowed up by existing contractual arrangements, as *The Guardian* recently said was likely.

The central tenet of the 1944 Act was for schools to provide a lunchtime meal that was suitable in all respects to be the main meal of the day, along with the free provision of transport, milk and medical and dental treatment for schoolchildren. Local education authorities invariably satisfied this criterion and, despite the odd serving of pink custard and grey stew, the health of children—and, consequentially, that of the nation as a whole—improved immeasurably. We are still reaping the benefits of that policy, and many in the House, particularly on the Government Benches, are living proof of its success.

Ironically, as we have learned more about diet and healthy eating habits, the nutritional value of food in schools has gone in the opposite direction. It is irrefutable that the most significant blow struck to the nutritional value of school meals was the 1980 Act, ushered in by a Government headed by a grocer's daughter. That is a further irony, upon which I must not dwell.

From September 2005, new statutory minimum standards for nutrition in school food will be in place, and it is vital that Suzi Leather and her teams resist the

[David Taylor]

predictable overtures from companies that benefit from the lax stop-gap introduced in 2001 for nutritional content—or rather, food group standards.

The school meals review panel's Department for Education and Skills remit is strongly to consider the introduction of nutrient-based nutritional standards, using the Caroline Walker Trust guidelines as a starting point, and in doing so to bear in mind issues of cost and implementation. While use of these guidelines as a starting point is most welcome, it is the bearing in mind of the issues of cost and implementation that rings alarm bells in my mind.

Given the uneven nature of the provision of school meals and the present shortfall in nutritional content, I respectfully suggest that issues of cost and implementation should not be the concern of the review panel. The needs of the private sector run counter to the short-term health and educational needs of children and the longer-term public health needs of society, and to raise that aspect in guidance to the panel smacks of an eventual compromise.

Then we have the systemic and myopic use of the private finance initiative in education. The appalling failure of the engineering firm W. S. Atkins in delivering even a modest education service for the children and parents of Southwark, one of London's poorest boroughs, should make the Government wary of promoting profit in the education sector. Sadly, some Ministers remain unremittingly upbeat about the continued involvement of private finance in education, and frustratingly reluctant to admit it when the policy fails children, teachers and parents, as has happened in Southwark and elsewhere.

It appears that the lessons from handing an engineering firm the contract to teach the national curriculum in Southwark schools have not yet been acknowledged by the Government, although the private sector is certainly mindful of Atkins' failure towards children and parents in Southwark, and the negative publicity that that rightly generated. An analysis of local education authorities in *The Times Educational Supplement* found that performance in the public sector surpassed that in LEAs that had been privatised. Indeed, there is a long list of LEAs that remain trapped in binding direct service provider contracts with private companies such as Amey, Serco and the unfortunately named Tribal Group.

As with its involvement in the NHS, the private sector's attitude to state education is generally to cherry-pick the most lucrative parts of the service. Catering, along with building construction and maintenance, is certainly one of the most profitable aspects of the state education service. Merton council in south-west London has judged that its six new PFI schools could be exempt from new Government guidelines on nutrition under the terms of the 25-year PFI contract, which includes catering. That is a shocking conclusion at which to have arrived. There are 450 other PFI schools in England and Wales. No doubt the redeployment of Lord Adonis as the Education and Skills Minister in another place will increase the flow of private profiteers into our schools, but if that brand-new peer and his backers think that that is the way to reform education for the benefit of the many and not the few, they really are in another place.

One of the most important and successful aspects of "Jamie's School Dinners" was publicising the poor conditions, lack of training and low pay with which kitchen staff in our schools must cope. The average wage for school kitchen staff remains about £82. As Unison has observed, attacks on retainer pay and ineligibility for jobseeker's allowance during the holidays has locked in a meagre national income with an hourly rate below the statutory minimum wage.

The dinner lady—more than 98 per cent. of school catering staff are female—is one of the most important and remembered workers in state schools. Those of us who went to such schools tend to remember the invariably good-humoured staff who served us our food for much of our time there. However, little did we realise the extent to which they were exploited. The Government have known that since 1997, and finally did something about it last year in the public health White Paper, "Choosing Health". The creation of a new vocational qualification is good news for the present and future Nora Sands in our school kitchens, but guarantees must be secured that catering staff, as we should now call them, will receive pay for attending training and other prescribed national vocational courses, so perhaps the Minister would like to state the Government's feelings on that subject when she responds.

It is also good to hear that the Learning and Skills Council will be allocated some of the £280 million to introduce a new ladder of qualifications to train staff in the basics of hygiene and nutrition, as well as the necessary preparation and cooking skills that will help our school kitchens and their suppliers to move away from the oven and towards the stove. I will be grateful if the Minister confirms the amount that the training programme will receive, how the programme will be implemented and, again, whether catering staff will be paid to attend training courses, as they would in any other industry. The Government must follow their bold and progressive streak—we are told that we are better when we are bolder—and we must resist the predictable and hollow accusations of nanny state-ism from the usual suspects, such as the *Daily Mail*.

An attractive menu to follow could be the Soil Association's "Food for Life" school meals action pack. It recommends that at least 50 per cent. of meal ingredients should be sourced from the local region, that at least 30 per cent. of food served should have improved nutrient quality, that three quarters of all food should be made from unprocessed ingredients, that school lunches should meet the nutrition targets set by the Caroline Walker Trust, and finally that, via the national curriculum, better classroom education on food and sustainability issues should be implemented.

In closing, may I say that there are no unhealthy foods, only unhealthy diets? However, present school menus still have far too many unhealthy choices. More and more schools and parents are trying hard to promote healthier eating and combat the immense power of advertisers and peer groups; as a father of four daughters, I know how difficult that task can be. We have a moral, social and economic duty to back them to the hilt in their work to persuade children to be non-

conformist in their dietary decisions. I look forward to hearing the Minister, whom I greatly respect, describe how she plans so to do.

10.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Maria Eagle): It is good to be back. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) on securing the debate. It is an essential subject if we wish, as we all do, to ensure that all our children can develop to their full potential and live happy and healthy lives.

There is a real will to make improvements, as my hon. Friend acknowledged. The Government have been making progress in the matter by promoting whole-school approaches to health, as he mentioned. We reintroduced nutritional standards in 2001 and promised to review their effectiveness. Our strong belief is that this push will eventually result in happier, healthier children who are confident and motivated to make important life and health choices, and who are more likely to behave well and perform well academically.

Whole-school food policies and the quality of school meals are vital components in this strategy. As my hon. Friend said, recent studies have shown that the prevalence of obesity and of being overweight is increasing in children and we know that children eat far too much fat, salt and sugar and on average less than half the recommended daily portions of fruit and vegetables. We are clear about how to tackle the problem. Working closely with the soon-to-be-established school food trust, to which my hon. Friend made favourable reference, we will define nutritional standards for school meals, ensure that sufficient money is in the system to meet minimum spending levels on ingredients and that it is well spent, monitor closely the improvements or changes that result, and stimulate demand for higher quality by mobilising and empowering consumers and stakeholders.

We will be persistent advocates for change and build capacity in the system to meet the demand for improvements. That will mean challenging and supporting local authorities and other partners—schools, school caterers, suppliers and contractors—to ensure that effective local delivery of our national standards can be achieved. We will make full use of available capital resources to improve dining areas and kitchens. That is essential if there is to be real improvement in the future. We will develop and roll out improved training for school catering staff, another point that my hon. Friend emphasised.

Research by the Department for Education and Skills and the Food Standards Agency into secondary school meal standards published last year has given us a valuable insight into how the current standards and guidance are being applied. The research confirmed that there is still much to do to improve school meals, and that work is needed to improve pupils' food choices. Even in schools where healthy food is offered, pupils are making poor choices.

We have convened an expert school meals review panel. My hon. Friend mentioned the work of that group, which met for the first time last week. It is a temporary advisory group consisting of 24 members from a variety of professional backgrounds, including field and academic dieticians and nutritionists, school head teachers, governors and support staff, and catering and industry professionals. Observers from key Government Departments will also attend the meetings.

The remit of the panel is to advise the Government on how best to meet their commitment in the public health White Paper to improving school food through the revision of school meals standards aimed at delivering a reduction in pupils' consumption of fat, salt and sugar and an increase in the consumption of fruit, vegetables and other foods containing essential nutrients. The panel has been asked to recommend what form nutritional standards for schools should take and to strongly consider moving from food group standards to nutrient-based standards while bearing in mind issues of cost and implementation. My hon. Friend was concerned about that, but value for money in the spending of public funds is always an important consideration.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) for an excellent speech, and invite the Minister to look back at my Adjournment debate last year on school meals, after Conservative-controlled Essex county council in effect abolished school meals in primary schools. What will happen to primary schools across Essex, particularly in my constituency, not all of which now provide a school meals service? At the very least, would it not be a good idea to reintroduce the Education Act 1944, which sensibly laid out what was required? My concern is that there are schoolchildren who do not even have the opportunity for a school dinner.

Maria Eagle: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I will look at that. He will realise that some of us are new to our responsibilities and will not have followed as assiduously as Ministers in the previous Parliament every single Adjournment debate. However, I shall certainly look up that debate and get back to him on that.

The panel will also advise on whether there are grounds for restricting choice, or restricting or eliminating certain types of food or food ingredients from schools meals, and on the costs and benefits of specifying proportions of fresh, unprocessed food and introducing hot food in all schools, and recommend whether certain foodstuffs should be restricted or banned. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that that remit enables some radical thinking to be done by that expert group, and we look forward to hearing what it has to say.

The timetable for implementation is that the panel aims to have draft minimum standards for secondary schools from September 2005, with schools being free to start to work towards them from that date, with those for primary schools following shortly afterwards, and with the final version of the standards coming into force from September 2006. Those are serious moves forward.

It is envisaged that the one-year lead-in will allow sufficient time for schools and local education authorities to assess the changes that will need to be made and, with the additional funding that will be made available to them, to make progress towards achieving the new requirements ready for their implementation in September 2006.

[Maria Eagle]

Once the school meal standards have been considered, it is envisaged that the panel will consider how the standards could apply to other food and drink on school premises, such as the vending machines and tuck shops to which my hon. Friend referred.

My hon. Friend will know that the decentralised system of education funding means that the LEAs receive an amount based on need in their area to deal with this subject. They then agree with their schools how funding is to be delegated. Funding for school meals is delegated to all secondary schools, with primary and special schools being able to opt for delegation. Where a school has a delegated budget for meals the governing body takes on responsibility for their provision. That includes providing free school meals to pupils, providing for paid meals where requested, complying with the requirements of the nutritional standards for schools lunches and deciding on the ingredient content and cost of the school meal. That system allows schools to purchase a school meals service that best meets the needs of the school and its pupils. However, we have decided that additional funding is needed, to which my hon. Friend also referred, to help LEAs and schools make the necessary changes that we want to see.

Over the next three years, commencing early in the autumn term, £220 million will be allocated by direct grants to LEAs and schools. In each of the three years 2005–06 to 2007–08, £30 million will be given in grants to schools. That funding will be paid to all maintained schools by local authorities on the basis of a formula determined by the Government. It will not be ring-fenced, but it is intended to help to meet transitional costs for schools in developing and improving their whole school approach to food. It might include, for example, reviewing the whole school approach; reviewing meals provision, particularly in the light of the new nutritional standards; retraining school meals staff; or preparing for healthy schools accreditation.

A further £130 million over that three-year period will be paid in grants to LEAs. That funding will be ring-fenced for improving the quality of school meals and other food provided by schools. Funding will be available to all LEAs to support schools. The first call on that money will be transition funding to help schools provide meals with ingredients costing 50p or more in primary schools and 60p or more in secondary schools. Further details of the distribution of both grants will be announced in due course. Both grants are intended to provide transitional funding and will be available over that three-year period.

That additional funding will not, of course, change the way that the usual allocation of funding for the purposes of providing school meals will be decided. But we also know that financial support alone may not be sufficient to help schools and LEAs to make the necessary improvements. My hon. Friend referred to someone in his constituency who wanted independent advice about nutritional standards.

The school food trust currently exists in an interim form and will be key to achieving those improvements. It has an interim board and my hon. Friend referred to some of its personnel. It remains for us fully to determine its remit, which will include providing independent support, advice and practical encouragement to local authorities, schools and parents to improve the standard of school meals, and working with parents to improve meals. It is intended that the food industry, caterers, nutritionists and food interest groups will be involved in developing the trust and that those with an interest in school food will be represented on the board, which will receive some £15 million in funding from my Department over three years. In addition, the Big Lottery Fund has decided to allocate up to £45 million to support healthy eating projects and initiatives for children, parents and their wider communities as part of a strategic programme to promote well-being.

Parental involvement is essential. We know that the most effective food policies involve the entire school community—teachers, school caterers, governors, pupils and parents. Parents have a major part to play and we want them to work constructively with schools and the school food trust to help to improve their school meals service. A dedicated toolkit will be available this autumn to help parents identify how they can become involved.

My hon. Friend made some fond references to school catering staff—the dinner ladies at his school were obviously extremely good. We will introduce funding, support and guidance for school catering staff, but ensuring that catering staff are well-trained is also essential. A key feature of the Government's proposals for remodelling the school work force is to improve training, development and career progression for all support staff, including school catering staff. The Government want support staff to have greater opportunities to work in the kinds of roles that they want and to have training opportunities to enable them to carry out their expected roles.

To support those measures, the Government have invested considerable funds in the training and development of support staff including, for example, in the standards fund and the higher level teaching assistant programme. We have also worked with key partners to encourage the development of training programmes and qualifications for support staff and provided moneys, including through the Learning and Skills Council, for the development of generic vocational qualifications at level 2 for all support staff.

My hon. Friend referred to the vocationally related qualification that we have decided to develop. A study on secondary school meals recommended that a basic qualification should be developed, including the basic aspects of nutrition, which would give school cooks the knowledge and skills to deliver a healthier school meals service. It will allow the learner to provide a range of healthier food and meals in a school dining room and to develop ideas and material to promote healthier food choices to the children through the school meals service. I hope that my hon. Friend supports those developments, and judging from what he said earlier, I think that he will.

Schools will be able to use some of the additional £220 million to help with the costs of training for school catering staff. Pay and contractual arrangements for support staff are currently determined locally to suit local circumstances. That may include any arrangements schools and LEAs make for releasing support staff to undergo training and development, and the decision whether support staff are paid for such

training. We strongly encourage schools and LEAs to consider releasing support staff, as many already do, to attend training and development, especially where it is job-related, and to pay staff as if they are undertaking their normal duties.

David Taylor: I am grateful to the Minister for her answers so far, and I support much of what she has said. Does she recognise that a problem can occur, particularly among LEAs in the poorer areas of our country, where private finance initiatives are in place for the provision of education services? PFI contracts are so long and inflexible that the improvements that parents, staff and pupils might like to see in the school meals service cannot be incorporated in the delivery of that service.

Maria Eagle: I was just coming on to issues raised by hon. Friend around compulsory/competitive tendering, best value and the impact of PFIs. He has made his views clear and I listened carefully to what he had to say. I hope that he will accept that the PFI is intended to deliver more cost-effective public services by involving the private sector more directly in provision. It has an important role to play in securing a modern educational infrastructure that is fit for the 21st century. It can bring better value for taxpayers' money by harnessing private sector expertise and innovation and by allocating risk to the partner best placed to manage it. It is not entirely without potential downsides—

The motion having been made at Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 24 May 2005

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

Marsha Singh, *for* Bradford, West

Charlotte Jean Atkins, Staffordshire, Moorlands

Michael David Wills, North Swindon

PRIVATE BUSINESS

PRIVATE BILLS [LORDS] (REVIVAL)

Motion made,

That so much of the Lords Message [19th May] as relates to the Liverpool City Council (Prohibition of Smoking in Places of Work) Bill [*Lords*] be now considered.

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Tuesday 7 June.

Motion made,

That so much of the Lords Message [19th May] as relates to the London Local Authorities (Prohibition of Smoking in Places of Work) Bill [*Lords*] be now considered.

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Tuesday 7 June.

Motion made,

That so much of the Lords Message [19th May] as relates to the London Local Authorities Bill [*Lords*] be now considered.

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Tuesday 7 June.

WAYS AND MEANS

SESSIONAL RETURNS

Ordered,

That Returns be laid before the House for Session 2004–05 of information and statistics relating to—

(1) Business of the House;

(2) Closure of Debate, Proposal of Question and Allocation of Time (including Programme Motions);

(3) Sittings of the House;

(4) Private Bills and Private Business;

(5) Public Bills;

(6) Delegated Legislation and Regulatory Reform Orders;

(7) European Legislation, etc;

(8) Grand Committees;

(9) Chairmen's Panel; and

(10) Select Committees.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Bus Regulation

1. **Mr. John Grogan** (Selby) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the Government's policy on bus regulation. [420]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Dr. Stephen Ladyman): Local authorities and bus operators working in partnership have produced striking examples of good practice in many places. We believe that these provide the best way forward for most other areas to follow. Beyond that, we are keen to see some authorities develop more radical options within an integrated transport plan.

Mr. Grogan: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment? Does he agree that, given that the Mayor of London has extensive powers to determine bus routes and service frequency in the interests of passengers, there is no logical reason why similar powers should not be available to councils representing the great northern population centres, such as Manchester, Liverpool, York, Leeds, Doncaster and, indeed, Selby and other rural areas?

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his congratulations. May I pass on the apologies of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), who is recuperating from a minor operation and would otherwise have answered this question?

London is unique—it does not have the same problems and issues as other areas—so there is a logical reason why arrangements there might differ from those that we apply elsewhere. I believe that the objectives that my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) has in mind can be developed within the existing infrastructure and within the partnerships that we are trying to encourage.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Is the Minister aware that the road transport directive will have a particularly adverse impact on rural bus services? Is he also aware that exempting journeys under 50 km will not cover most rural bus companies, and will he look specifically at companies such as Norfolk Green, in my constituency, whose annual costs will rise by roughly £250,000 because of these Euro-directives?

Dr. Ladyman: We will indeed review the working time directive within the next 12 months, and we are well

aware of the rural transport issues. We have to improve rural transport, and we will work very hard to do that over the coming years.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): When I did my O-levels in 1977, the excellent Tyne and Wear Metro system delivered me to school by train and by bus through a transfer ticket. That happened under a regulated system, but in Wrexham today under an unregulated system, the buses do not stop at the railway station, even though the same company runs the trains and the buses. Will the Minister and the Government please accept that it is about time that we had a regulated system, to enable the progress made in London to be made in other areas?

Dr. Ladyman: I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend expresses, and we do expect rail services and bus companies to work closely together. The objectives that he sets out can be delivered within the existing structures. We want to develop new types of partnership, and the mechanisms are in place to achieve them. If my hon. Friend has particular concerns about transport in his local area, my colleagues and I would be pleased to hear from him.

Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am sure that the Minister will join me in extending the sympathies of the House to the families of the schoolgirls who died in the tragic road accident in County Meath in the Irish Republic yesterday. Does it not highlight the need to introduce legislation to make it compulsory to fit seat belts in school buses throughout the United Kingdom?

Dr. Ladyman: I certainly want to extend my sympathy and that of the Government to the families of the girls who sadly died. We must do all that we can to avoid similar tragedies in the future, so we shall look carefully into what happened in that case and in similar accidents in order to learn what we can from them. If the hon. Gentleman's proposal is advanced in the responses, I have no doubt that we will want to bring it forward.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend understand the concerns of my constituents who, year on year, see their bus service provision decline, passenger numbers decline and fares rise at a rate above inflation? With 42 days' notice, my constituents can see their links with their employment, doctors, post offices and families simply cut off. Will my hon. Friend reiterate his Department's commitment during the last Parliament to work with the South Yorkshire passenger transport authority to develop a quality bus contract for Sheffield to ensure that we have a coherent and consistent local bus framework in the area?

Dr. Ladyman: Of course I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that we will do all that we can to encourage in his area productive partnerships that will drive up the number of passengers and the capacity of bus services to accommodate them. In other parts of the country, however, where best practice is being followed and these partnerships are being developed between different modes of transport and between transport companies and local authorities, "passengership" is actually on the rise. There is no reason why a similar success story could not be repeated in my hon. Friend's area.

Train Services (Overcrowding)

2. **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): What steps are being taken to reduce overcrowding on train services. [421]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Derek Twigg): The Government are working with the industry to deliver improvements to capacity and performance, which, along with a better deployment of rolling stock and improvements to operating practices and timetables, will improve performance and help alleviate overcrowding.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, but does he share the concern of my constituents who use the Thameslink services about the daily overcrowding that continues to occur on that line? Since 1997, people commuting into London have experienced unacceptable levels of overcrowding. Is it not time that the Government reflected on what they did in 1997 when they introduced regulations governing standards of overcrowding for livestock, and started to do something about the cattle-truck standards of overcrowding that people undergo every day in coming into London?

Derek Twigg: Rail passenger journeys have increased by 29 per cent. since 1997. In 2003, for the first time since 1961, more than 1 billion rail journeys were made, and more than a billion such journeys were also made in 2004. There are more than 2,000 additional weekday train services in operation in comparison with 1996–97. More than 1,300 new railway vehicles, with better access for disabled people, came into service during 2004 as part of the biggest rolling stock replacement programme ever seen in this country. That takes the total number of new vehicles to have entered service since 1999 to more than 2,000.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What will my hon. Friend do about overcrowding in car parks? Because of the success brought about by the additional services, there is now a real need for additional car parking. Does my hon. Friend intend to invest in car parking provision around railway stations?

Derek Twigg: I understand that there is a problem, but Network Rail and the train operating companies are looking into it and working together to produce some solutions.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): Given the overcrowding that is experienced by St. Albans travellers on the Thameslink service, will the Minister, as a matter of urgency, try to progress the Thameslink 2000 project before 2012, especially as it could be crucial to our Olympic bid?

Derek Twigg: Planning should be starting this autumn.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My hon. Friend deserves credit for the amount of money that Her Majesty's Government have spent on new rolling stock, but will he look carefully into the contracts that are being issued? Overcrowding can

frequently be dealt with by new rolling stock, not reconstituted rolling stock. In Crewe, Derby and many other engineering centres, we certainly want to see the new trains being built by British companies.

Derek Twigg: As my hon. Friend knows, we now have more rolling stock, but better performance management is also important. We need to look at timetables, man management, reliability and ticketing, and we must also ensure that there is effective planning in respect of utilisation strategies.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Speaker, and may I say what a great pleasure it is to be asking questions with you in the Chair once again?

Five years ago, the Government's 10-year plan for transport pledged

"less overcrowding and reduced delays"

for people travelling by train in London, but the Transport Committee has concluded that overcrowding on London's transport is bad and likely to get worse. It has said that the Government are not taking the problem seriously but, in its complacency, the Department has said that there

"will be occasions when crowding will occur."

To show that the Government are taking the problem seriously, will the Minister shut his Red Book and give us a real answer? Will he tell us today what specific steps the Government intend to take to deal with overcrowding?

Derek Twigg: That question is a bit rich coming from the hon. Gentleman, given that his party wants to cut public expenditure. In fact, performance has improved: there is more rolling stock; working practices are better; the different companies involved are displaying greater co-operation; and the management of the system is better than it used to be. Performance is improving, which would not happen if the Opposition were in government.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that passenger use of light rail systems, such as the Tyne and Wear Metro and its counterparts in other conurbations, may suffer an unintentional reduction? That will happen if the free travel service to be introduced next year is not extended to such systems. That free service is welcome, but private bus operators will profit at the expense of publicly run services. What consideration is being given to representations made on this point?

Derek Twigg: Local passenger transport executives will have to consider what more they can do to tackle that problem.

Speed Cameras

3. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West) (Con): What representations he has received about the criteria for installing speed cameras. [422]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Department receives many representations about safety cameras, including some about the criteria for camera sites, and of course we review all aspects of the safety camera programme every year.

Mr. Amess: Essex collects more money than anywhere else in the country in fines resulting from speed cameras, and my constituents feel a growing sense of injustice. Some of them have been criminalised for doing 33 mph or 44 mph, while a public servant can get away with driving on a public road at 159 mph. What work has the Secretary of State commissioned to determine the number of accidents caused by people slamming on their brakes when they see a yellow camera? How much of the money collected from those fines—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Darling: In respect of the hon. Gentleman's final point, the law states that where there is a 30 mph speed limit, people must drive at 30 mph or less. It is important to remember that all the evidence shows that speed cameras have led to a substantial reduction in the number of people killed or seriously injured. I repeat what I said in the previous Parliament: if the hon. Gentleman believes that there is any doubt about the appropriateness of a speed camera site, in Essex or anywhere else, I shall look into it. However, the House will recall that we commissioned an independent study just over a year ago. It looked at the siting of every single camera and found that there had been a reduction of something like 40 per cent. in the number of people killed or seriously injured. That proves that the cameras save lives. The hon. Gentleman and the rest of the House should bear it in mind that drivers are supposed to stick to the speed limits that have been imposed. Therefore, they should not be forced by the fact that they are driving too fast to put on their brakes in the sudden way that he described.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): My right hon. Friend spent good money on last year's independent report, which proved that there have been substantial reductions in the number of casualties suffered on those stretches of road covered by speed cameras. Is he not dismayed, therefore, that there remains an unreconstructed minority who will not accept that fact? Speed cameras are a road safety measure with proven benefits in terms of reducing the number of casualties, and no driver who keeps within the speed limit ever has to pay a fine.

Mr. Darling: I do understand that people caught by speed cameras feel frustrated and sometimes irritated. However, people like the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who believe that speed cameras should not be used or are not effective, must bear it in mind that there are families up and down the country with members still alive who might otherwise have been killed because of speeding drivers. Speed is one element of road safety.

I strongly believe that cameras should be placed only where justified. In fact, several cameras have been removed from places where they are no longer justified. However, the blanket, and sometimes unthinking,

opposition to speed cameras is unjustified. Opposition Members might want to reflect on the fact that we get as many representations from Conservative councils to have speed cameras as we do to have them removed.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State not realise that the public would have more respect for him and what he has to say if he came clean on this issue and admitted that the prime duty of many speed cameras is to raise revenue from the long-suffering British motorist? If he will not admit that, will he tell us why speed cameras are now appearing on our motorways, which are the safest roads in Britain? Why are speed cameras being installed on the M4, for example? Is not the only answer to the growing public disquiet on this issue for him to announce a full audit of all speed cameras, coupled with a review of speed limits, to restore a sense of justice and fairness to the enforcement of our road traffic laws?

Mr. Darling: There is about one month until the next Transport questions, which is ample time for the right hon. Gentleman to provide one example of a camera that has been set up to raise money rather than to save lives. As I have said before, the best road safety camera is one that does not raise a single penny. They are there to save lives and for no other reason. The decision to place the cameras on the M4 in Wiltshire was taken by the local partnership—the police and the local council. Before the speed cameras were imposed, 53 per cent. of cars were seen to be exceeding the speed limit. A month later, that figure is down to 25 per cent., which suggests that cameras have an effect in persuading drivers to keep to the speed limit.

On the general point about raising speed limits, I am not persuaded of that, contrary to press reports at the weekend. The evidence from the police is that although the speed limit on motorways is 70 mph, many people drive 10 mph faster. If the limit were raised to 80 mph, people might drive faster still.

When we debate such issues, we should remember that 10 people are killed on our roads every day. If that happened in a single railway accident, there would be demands for a statement in the House and for lines to be closed. Ten families today will lose someone, so we should do everything reasonable to try to improve road safety. We have a good record in this country, but sometimes unthinking comments—such as those just made uncharacteristically by the right hon. Gentleman—are unjustified. I look forward to hearing from him in a month's time about which camera he had in mind.

Corsham Station (Wiltshire)

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): When Corsham station in Wiltshire will be reopened; and if he will make a statement. [423]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Derek Twigg): There are currently no plans to reopen Corsham station. The business case for reopening the station is poor because of the costs involved, and also the withdrawal of the Bristol to Oxford service, which would have called at the station.

Mr. Foster: I thank the Minister for that disappointing reply. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), who also cares passionately about this issue but cannot be in his place, will be equally disappointed. Is the Minister aware that a large number of car commuters drive from Corsham into my constituency, adding significantly to congestion? Is he aware that there was a plan to reopen the station, with the funding in place and all local authorities supporting it, but that it was scrapped? Now the rail utilisation study will seemingly put high-speed inter-city trains above any commuter trains, but surely that should be reconsidered. Will the Minister at least agree to meet a small delegation of people concerned about the issue, to see if they can persuade him to put pressure on the Strategic Rail Authority to change its mind?

Derek Twigg: First, yes I am happy to meet a delegation. As the hon. Gentleman says, a redevelopment proposal had been made, but the business case did not stack up because of unforeseen ground conditions and also the withdrawal of the Oxford to Bristol train. I cannot really add anything to my first answer, but I am willing to meet a delegation.

Rushenden Link Road

5. **Derek Wyatt** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): When he expects to announce funding for the Rushenden link road on the Isle of Sheppey. [424]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Dr. Stephen Ladyman): The Rushenden link road has been selected for detailed appraisal for grant support from the new community infrastructure fund in 2006–07 and 2007–08. Detailed bid information must be submitted to the Department for Transport and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister by the end of July 2005. Decisions will be announced later this year.

Derek Wyatt: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and congratulate him on his richly deserved promotion. Will his office or the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister be responsible for making the final decision on the scheme?

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his good wishes. The answer to his question is both: there is a double lock on the fund. The scheme will have to convince me of its merits in terms of good value for money for transport, and the ODPM in terms of its potential for unlocking growth in the area. As I said, there are no promises. The detailed plans still have to be submitted, but the scheme looks like a good candidate for funding at this stage.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The Minister of State's answer may or may not be of comfort to the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Derek Wyatt), but it will be small comfort to other constituents in Kent who feel very short-changed indeed by the Government. Can the Minister explain why, having agreed the funding for phase 1 of the east Kent access road, his Government, with him as a Minister, have failed to approve phases 2 and 3?

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is beyond the question.

North-south Railway Line

6. **Mark Lazarowicz** (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): What his policy is on a north-south high-speed rail line. [425]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Chancellor and I have asked Rod Eddington, the outgoing chief executive of British Airways, to advise on the long-term impact of transport decisions on UK productivity, stability and growth. His work will assess the effects of potential new infrastructure, such as a north-south high-speed railway line.

Mark Lazarowicz: I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about the assessment, but I urge him to give high priority to the proposal for a new high-speed north-south rail line. It is almost two years since the Government's advisory body, the Commission for Integrated Transport, proposed the scheme and the Strategic Rail Authority has given it positive backing. May I suggest that the idea should have a positive steer from the Government? If the system goes ahead it will bring great benefits to passengers and also to the entire UK rail network.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. Both the Commission for Integrated Transport and the SRA looked at the scheme, although I am bound to say that it was done at a fairly high level. Before any Government would commit themselves to what would be billions of pounds of public expenditure, they would need to be sure that it was the right thing to do. The reason why we asked Rod Eddington to look into those matters is that it is important that we start to move away from a situation where successive British Governments have spent much of their time on transport fixing the problems of the past, and to consider what we need in relation to the transport requirements for the next 20 to 30 years. One of the things that we need to consider is whether we should be building high-speed railway links, not only between the north and the south but possibly to other parts of the country. We also need to look into issues such as the long-term sustainability of air transport and so on, as well as the road network. We need to look at all aspects of transport and, given the fact that in any view the work programme will go on for 20 to 30 years, I hope that for once in the House we can build an all-party consensus on what we should do.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State satisfied and happy that even after the completion of the modernisation of the west coast main line, train services between London and Glasgow will still take up to four and a half hours, with the fastest services being little better than what was achieved in the mid-1970s? Why cannot we have a high-speed rail line between Scotland and London? Why is Scotland so poorly served in comparison with other European nations?

Mr. Darling: The answer is that we may, at some stage, conclude that the right thing to do is to build a high-speed railway line between Scotland and the south of England. One day, even the hon. Gentleman and his fellow members of the Scottish National party might like to come down to England and see the benefits of being part of a United Kingdom; there are many, many of them, as the voters decided so comprehensively just over two weeks ago. The line is one of the issues that we need to consider, but as I said, we need to look at what the long-term capacity requirements are in relation to all types of transport.

In relation to the west coast main line, I remind the hon. Gentleman that, yes, it suffered from under-investment for 30 years. Successive Governments were guilty of that. However, because we have spent just under £8 billion, we now have a high-speed railway line. There is further work to be done, but journey times are improving. I suspect that none of that would have happened if there had been a separate Scotland.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I think that my right hon. Friend was alluding in his answer to the importance of encouraging modal shift from aviation to rail travel. If so, what else can be done, other than ensuring much greater investment in high-speed rail links, particularly to the channel tunnel?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend will be aware that phase 1 of the channel tunnel high-speed railway link, which is the first major high-speed railway to be built in this country, opened in the autumn of 2003. It has resulted in a considerable increase in passengers choosing to go to Paris, for example, by train, rather than flying. As for lines other than high speed, since the first stage of the west coast main line upgrade was completed, it is now very attractive to take the train from Manchester or Birmingham to central London. So those are two examples of improvements that have been made. Of course, from 2007, the channel tunnel rail link will go to St. Pancras station, cutting the journey time between Brussels or Paris and London and opening links to the north of the country. All those things are under way, but as I said, we also need to consider this country's long-term capacity requirements—sometimes, they will be best served by rail; sometimes, they will continue to be best served by air links, which are very important to many parts of this country.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): May I welcome Ministers to their new positions and particularly wish the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), a speedy recovery and a quick journey back to her ministerial desk?

I am looking forward to my encounters with the Secretary of State, but may I say from the outset that I totally agree with him that any planning for transport needs must have long-term horizons? If we can build a consensus in the interests of this country for exactly that purpose, we will do so.

Is it not true that existing economic activity must be served by efficient transport links and that where improved links are built, economic activity will invariably follow? Given an increasingly crowded south, is it not increasingly essential to share economic growth by linking us more efficiently to the north, as studies are now investigating?

Mr. Darling: First, may I in turn congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment as the principal spokesman on transport? I hope that we can build a consensus, where appropriate. One of the big issues that all parties must face up to in this Parliament, I suspect, is whether or not we develop, for example, road pricing in this country. We cannot build our way out of all the problems that we face. We need more road investment and we need to manage the system better, but we need to look for long-term solutions. If we can reach a consensus about that, it will serve the country well. As the hon. Gentleman says, it is perfectly obvious that, if we wish to remain competitive and one of the largest economies in the world, our transport infrastructure must be improved throughout the country—he is right about that—not just in the south-east. So I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman; I just hope that the spirit of consensus that he has set out lasts a little bit longer than it did with any of his predecessors.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): My constituents are very keen on extending the high-speed north-south links that are currently provided by the occasional Virgin service that stops during the morning and evening peak times. In advance of the platform extension that the Government will fund in 2008, is my right hon. Friend considering other measures that could be taken in the interim to meet the increasing needs of housing growth in Milton Keynes and commuter traffic?

Mr. Darling: I am glad that my hon. Friend remembered the platform extension, for which she campaigned long and hard. Two things come out of her question. First, the difficulties that emerge at Milton Keynes are a classic case of what happens when the planning of upgrades of railway lines and improvements are not thought through properly. The idea was a good one, as it would allow more fast inter-city trains, but there was some disadvantage to passengers at Milton Keynes. I hope that we can sort that out, and we will continue to work to do so.

My hon. Friend also raises another important point: we need more housing in this country, so we need good transport links—the two go hand in hand. The Government are determined to ensure that, when we plan those developments, the housing and the transport are developed at the same time. If we can achieve what would be a first for this country, by planning ahead and trying to fix the problems that we know will exist in the next 20 to 30 years, the country will be a lot better because of it.

Community Rail

7. **Andrew Stunell** (Hazel Grove) (LD): What plans he has for the further development of community rail; and if he will make a statement. [426]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Derek Twigg): A strategy for the development of community rail lines was published in November last year. Fifty-six routes have been proposed for designation. Seven pilot projects have been identified, and proposals for four of them are now out to consultation.

Andrew Stunell: I welcome the Minister to his new role. Is he aware of the serious fears of users of the Hazel Grove to Buxton line that if it is reinvented as a community railway, they will lose out? They already face the use of old rolling stock, a disrupted timetable and overcrowding during peak periods, and fear that the transfer of costs and liabilities to community groups and local authorities would lead to a transfer of blame, not a transfer of resources. Can he guarantee my constituents and commuters that that will not be the case?

Derek Twigg: The community rail strategy can be delivered only through partnership. There has been extensive consultation with industry and regional stakeholders. We have consistently made it clear that there will be extensive consultation on each local line before community rail designation takes place. If we do not get local support for a specific line, it will not be designated as a community rail route.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that community rail is absolutely vital in rural areas because we need to get people out of their cars? With that in mind, will he look at a proper strategy of not only reopening halts, but ensuring that we can operate more trains in such areas? Will he commission a report to determine how that could be done successfully?

Derek Twigg: As my hon. Friend rightly says, community rail is one way in which we can examine how we can improve services generally and on rural railways. The Government's general approach on local rural railways is to work towards making them sustainable in the long term so that they can continue to offer a vital service to passengers and freight, and contribute more to the local economy, as well as meeting Government targets on accessibility.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Following the passage of the Railways Act 2005, which body has the ultimate power of decision on community services running along the English-Welsh border?

Derek Twigg: The Department for Transport.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend keep a close eye on developments on the Wrexham-Bidston line, which goes through Neston in my constituency? Innovative work is going on in the area and there is good will among a lot of people. Will he ensure that his Department gives the line every possible support, because I firmly believe that it can be important for the future?

Derek Twigg: I am aware of the general interest in the project in the region and I shall of course keep a close eye on it. I will be happy if my hon. Friend wants to talk to me about it or arrange for a delegation to come and see me.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I, too, welcome the Secretary of State's colleagues to the Front Bench and wish his junior Minister a swift recovery and speedy return to the House?

The transport innovation fund should be a good source of investment for community rail, yet the fund itself and its whereabouts are proving somewhat elusive. Will the Minister tell us how much money has been allocated to the fund, whether that is new money or simply a reallocation from 2004 spending plans, when that funding will come on stream, and whether it could be used for the Manchester tram extension, for example?

Derek Twigg: Can I get one thing correct? The fund is not actually for community rail, but for bigger capital transport projects. I will happily write to the hon. Gentleman with the details that he requested.

Manchester Metrolink

9. **Graham Stringer** (Manchester, Blackley) (Lab): When work on the next stage of the Greater Manchester Metrolink system will start. [428]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Alistair Darling): The position remains as I set out in my statement to the House on 16 December last year. The Greater Manchester passenger transport executive submitted proposals for the maintenance and renewal of the Metrolink system earlier this year. I hope to make a decision on that imminently.

Graham Stringer: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the refurbishment in phases 1 and 2 of the system is vital for both the current working and eventual expansion of the system. He will also be aware that a previous Minister of State in the Department told the Transport Committee in March that he would "crack the whip" over officials to get an early decision on the matter. Has the whip been cracked, and can we expect a very early decision?

Mr. Darling: As I said a moment ago, my hon. Friend, and Manchester, can expect a decision soon. Obviously, the small matter of the general election delayed things—it is generally thought to be a bad idea to announce good news during an election.

Jim Dobbin (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Graham Stringer). Will the Minister do his very best to fast-track the implementation of the extension of Metrolink, especially the Rochdale-Oldham link? It is vital for the redevelopment of the new town centre in Rochdale and the development of the Kingsway industrial park, which is coming on stream now.

Mr. Darling: I am well aware of the benefits that people believe the extension of the Metrolink will bring. As I said, I set out in my statement of 16 December last year the way in which the Government propose to deal with the matter. That remains the position. It has not changed at all. What we said in essence was that the passenger transport executive would be able to work up plans both for the metro and for other measures better to manage traffic within the Greater Manchester area, either from their own resources or from bidding into the transport innovation fund, which, to follow on from the last question, was established by the Government in last year's spending review. All the details are set out if my hon. Friend wants to look at them. The idea is that that money is available for big infrastructure changes that would improve the flow of traffic and therefore the economic performance of areas. It is an important step, and I hope that Manchester, along with other areas, will benefit from it.

Paul Rowen (Rochdale) (LD): Is the Minister aware that there are speed restrictions on the Rochdale-Oldham line, that £2 million has had to be spent on emergency repairs, and that to make it fully operational will cost up to £60 million? Does he agree that the money would be better spent on the Metrolink line?

Mr. Darling: I am aware that that line needs attention; exactly how much remains to be seen. In my experience of railway finances, whenever anyone looks at a problem, they think of a very large number, double it and then add another few million to be going on with. It may not cost as much as people think.

In relation to the Manchester metro generally, the hon. Gentleman, being new to the House, has probably not had the chance to read in *Hansard* the interesting debates that we have had on the subject. The basic problem with that light rail scheme and others is that the cost has gone up and up, and we needed to get control of those costs. In Manchester, the cost went from £200 million to £500 million to perhaps as much as £900 million to build the three lines. Clearly, no Government could accept that. We needed to work with Manchester and the promoters of other schemes, which we are doing. When we build infrastructure, it is important to ensure that we have proper control of costs so that we get the maximum benefit out of it.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): The public in Greater Manchester were uplifted by the Prime Minister's positive words about Metrolink, as I think they will be by the Secretary of State's words today. However, I make the obvious point that it is important to realise that a light rail system is a network, not simply a number of individual lines. I hope that the Secretary of State takes that on board in the decisions that he will arrive at shortly.

Mr. Darling: I am seized of the importance of the Manchester Metrolink, which has been very successful. The problem is that the cost of building light rail schemes has escalated out of all proportion to what we would normally expect. That is partly because those who finance such schemes go off the idea and increase the amount that they charge for them.

Manchester, however, has a quite highly developed transport system already. Obviously, we want that to improve. As I said, it is in a strong position to bid into the transport innovation fund because it is a large conurbation and is important to the whole of the UK's economy, not just to the north-west of England. I hope that Manchester will consider all aspects of its transport and come up with a series of proposals, some of which I hope we can fund. As I said in December last year, that will include the Metrolink.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I do not want to smash our new-found consensus, but there

seems to be a serious lack of grip on the issue. The Government have kept the people of Manchester waiting and in April, talking of Metrolink in Oldham, the Prime Minister—needless to say, before the election—said:

"Well, I think you'll find something to celebrate in our manifesto".

Well, people did not find anything in it and they are certainly not celebrating. I appreciate that the exact details will come later, but can the Secretary of State at least give us a clue about what he intends? When will the work start? When will it finish? Will it be funded? When can he and I take an initial ride on the completed project?

Mr. Darling: In relation to manifestos, it seems to me from a casual reading of the results that more people found something to be pleased about in our manifesto than they did in the Conservative manifesto. *[Interruption.]* It seems that the Conservatives did not contest that many seats in the north-west of England. I am not surprised that the consensus broke down after about 20 minutes, which is something of a record.

I set out the position on the way forward for Manchester on 16 December, when I set out a programme of work in which both we and the Manchester PTE are engaged, and that is the best way of resolving the matter. As I have said to the House many times, no Government, faced with a cost that had escalated from £200 million to £900 million, could simply sign a cheque on that basis.

As the consensus has now broken—let us return to happier times—I remind the hon. Gentleman that he stood on an election platform that included a commitment to cut public spending by £35 billion. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives are in complete denial. Anyone who loses an election as badly as they did should at least look at why they lost. One reason is that their sums did not add up, and that is why they did not have a transport policy that worked.

Northampton Train Service

10. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North) (Lab): What improvements are planned to the train service to Northampton. [429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Derek Twigg): From June 2005 it is planned progressively to introduce new Desiro trains on the London fast services from Northampton and on services between Northampton and Birmingham. An additional hourly fast service will be introduced between Northampton and London in the off-peak periods in the winter 2005 timetable.

Ms Keeble: I welcome the improvements that have been made, but does my hon. Friend accept that because of the growth of Northampton, there is a need for big improvements in train services there? In moving forward, will he look in particular at increased frequency and improved punctuality for the fast services between London and Northampton, which are now provided only two or three times a day? Will he also consider improved services between Northampton and Birmingham, including restoration of the through services stopping at Northampton and providing an alternative route to Birmingham?

Derek Twigg: I know that my hon. Friend has done tremendous work on the improvements to Northampton's rail services, and as chair of the Northampton rail users group she has worked very hard with people locally. In the winter 2005 timetable there are additional links in non-peak periods to and from Crewe, and there will be additional links to and from Rugby and the west midlands, probably after the completion of the major reconstruction of the Rugby complex in 2006–07, so there will be a number of changes and improvements. We will consider the specific points that my hon. Friend made.

Nottingham City

11. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Nottingham city council on transport issues in the city. [430]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Dr. Stephen Ladyman): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State opened line 1 of the Nottingham express transit in March 2004 and my hon. Friend the then Minister of State for Transport launched the Link 1 and Link 2 bus services in September 2004. My officials also regularly meet officers of Nottingham city council to discuss transport issues in the city.

Mr. Allen: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment and ask him to come to Nottingham as soon as possible to see the large increase in the numbers of people using public transport in our city. I should be pleased to meet him at the Nottingham East Midlands airport, where he could use the Skylink bus service, part of our integrated transport system, which has had a threefold increase in usage. When he does that, will he also consider whether the kick-start bus support grant could be used to extend the service to the constituencies of my colleagues in Leicester and Derby, who are also very supportive of the concept of a Nottingham East Midlands airport?

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his good wishes, and I look forward to visiting him in Nottingham at my earliest opportunity. I can tell him that in the last few days, as I have been briefed in the Department on my new responsibilities, Nottingham has been constantly cited to me as a source of good practice and is well thought of in the Department. I hope that he will take that message back to the people who have done innovative work in his area.

Nottingham Tram

12. **Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South) (Lab): When he expects to give financial approval for lines 2 and 3 of the Nottingham tram. [431]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Dr. Stephen Ladyman): The Department has received a bid for the extensions, and is discussing procurement

and financing aspects with the promoters. Following this, we will make a decision as soon as we can on whether to grant provisional approval.

Alan Simpson: You can rely on two arriving at the same time, can you not, Mr. Speaker?

The Minister will know that line 1 of the Nottingham tram has been phenomenally successful and incredibly popular, with 8.5 million passengers in the first year, as against a target of 7 million, and that it is making money. The difficulty is that the applications for lines 2 and 3 have been sitting with the Department for about nine months, and we need to make progress with the Treasury. If there a date by which the trams currently stuck in the depot of the Department for Transport can make their way to the first stop in the Treasury?

Dr. Ladyman: I am pleased that line 1 has been so successful—it is yet another of the Labour Government's successes. I have to say that the position regarding lines 2 and 3 is not quite as simple as my hon. Friend suggests: a lot more work has to be done before approval can be given. However, if that work is done, line 1's success will encourage us to look closely at the proposals and to give a decision as soon as we can.

Branch Line Rolling Stock

13. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the reliability and quality of rolling stock on smaller branch lines. [432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Derek Twigg): We monitor rolling stock reliability on all routes, including branch lines, to ensure that train reliability improvements play their part in achieving our target of 85 per cent. on-time performance across the network by 2008. Train quality inevitably varies across the network, but the average age of the fleet has been reducing steadily since 2000 and continues to do so.

Chris Bryant: The Valley line service, which goes from Treherbert through Treorchy, Tonypandy, Porth and down into Cardiff is an excellent service—when it runs. Unfortunately, trains are taken off with monotonous regularity, either because they cannot pass on the single track, or—more troubling—because the rolling stock is so old that they break down. When can we expect new rolling stock on the smaller branch lines, so that people who are grateful to have a strong economy in south Wales, with the result that thousands more people are travelling to work in Cardiff, can benefit from strong public rail services?

Derek Twigg: I am aware of the problems with the Valley line service to Cardiff. The operators must work to reduce disruption and improve efficiency. It is worth pointing out that since privatisation in 1997 we have invested more than £4 billion in more than 4,000 new carriages, and heavy investment in new trains means that the average age of the train fleet is now less than 16 years, compared with more than 20 years in 2000. However, new trains might not be the most cost-effective solution; it might be more sensible to refurbish existing trains.

Heathrow Airport

14. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge) (Con): what discussions he has had with representatives of the aviation industry about a possible sixth terminal at Heathrow. [434]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Dr. Stephen Ladyman): There have been no such discussions recently. The possible need for a sixth terminal at Heathrow was raised by BAA in its response to consultation prior to the air transport White Paper, and I understand that it is continuing to look at the matter in the context of possible future development of Heathrow.

Mr. Randall: May I therefore expect the Minister to confirm that the Government would not be in favour of a sixth terminal?

Dr. Ladyman: I can only repeat my answer. An outline suggestion was put to us, but the matter has not been considered further and a heck of a lot of work would be needed before approval could even be seriously considered.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Chancellor was asked—

Public Sector Pensions

20. **Paddy Tipping** (Sherwood) (Lab): what recent discussions he has held with the relevant trade unions about public sector pension reform. [440]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr. John Hutton): I am meeting the civil service unions later this week. How we take forward civil service pension reform will be one of the issues for discussion. Following a productive meeting on 31 March, chaired by my right hon. Friend the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, further discussions will take place shortly with the relevant trade unions through the public services forum.

Paddy Tipping: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post and remind him that public sector pension reform is one of the big issues facing him. Does he accept that the trade unions recognise that change is necessary—indeed, inevitable—but that they are reluctant to discuss the detail and the timetable for work? Given that, will he hold some meetings soon to see whether there is a chance of finding consensus on this real problem?

Mr. Hutton: I agree with my hon. Friend that reform of public sector occupational pensions is an important issue for us all. It is a matter of record that both sides agree that the schemes need to be modernised and made more flexible; in addition, they have to be sustainable in the long term and affordable to taxpayers. We have tabled a set of proposals, and scheme-by-scheme

negotiations are under way, but I assure my hon. Friend, and all hon. Members, that we shall progress to early discussions with the relevant trade unions, with a view to securing as much agreement as possible on the way forward.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to his new position and congratulate him on his promotion. He mentioned affordability. Does he believe that reforms to civil service and public service pensions should follow the recommendation made at the weekend by Adair Turner, that retirement age and pension provision should vary according to social and educational background?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words; I hope that this will not be the last time that he is nice to me in this place. We shall see. The suggestions to which he refers have no relevance to the public sector reform proposals that we have tabled. They do not form any part of the package of proposals that we have tabled for discussion, and they will not do so.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell) (LD): The Minister will be only too well aware that the Government were heading into great difficulties with their proposals on pension reform for teachers, firefighters, medical staff, civil servants and others before the election, because people felt rushed into changes that had not been properly negotiated. The Government have now either sensibly decided, or been forced by circumstances during the election campaign, depending on one's point of view, to give more time for reform. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the great concern among all those employees is that traditionally in many of these sectors, there have been relatively low rates of pay compared with the private sector, which have been made up for by relatively strong terms and conditions of service in the context of protected jobs and good pensions? To take away some of their pension protections and privileges without considering the issue of pay has rubbed sorely with many of these people. Will the Minister accept that, and guarantee that the Government will consider those people's remuneration and terms-and-conditions packages?

Mr. Hutton: I certainly accept that public sector pensions should be seen as an important part of retaining and recruiting key front-line public servants. I think that that is common ground between us all. As I have said, there is an agreement on both sides of the table that there will need to be changes to the schemes. What we are signalling, and what we have said, is that we want to have proper discussions with the trade unions about how we can take the reforms forward.

I say in all candour to the hon. Gentleman—I know that he is against reform of any kind in the public sector—that there is a need for reform. We shall need to engage the trade unions in a debate about how those important pension schemes can be improved. It is silly to pretend that somehow we can wave all the problems away and hope that they will go away. They will not. The problems need to be engaged, and we will do that.

Civil Service

21. **Keith Vaz** (Leicester, East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase diversity in the civil service. [441]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Mr. Jim Murphy): The civil service is broadly representative of society in terms of gender and ethnicity. More than half its employees are women and 8.2 per cent. are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. A programme of action to achieve greater diversity will be published later this year.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as a Minister. May I remind him that it is not the political will that we question but the implementation of policies? Very few black or Asian people and very few women are in the most senior positions in the civil service. When will we be able to implement the action plans so that the civil service, especially the senior civil service, in England and Wales looks like Britain?

Mr. Murphy: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, and I pay tribute to the work that he has carried out over a number of years. Progress has been made on this important issue. The number of folk from black and ethnic minority backgrounds in senior positions in the civil service has doubled over the past seven years. However, more can be done. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on this issue. Work is being done with universities to reach students, to work with career advisers and to examine the issue of appointments to public bodies.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): I too welcome the appointment of the new Minister. In the answers that he has given to this question so far, is he saying that he is satisfied that the civil service is an equal opportunities employer already, or that reform needs to be made to bring about that happy state of affairs? If the civil service is already a satisfactory employer, why is he saying that more reform is needed? If it is not a satisfactory employer, why is he satisfied with the situation as it stands?

Mr. Murphy: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words of congratulation. It is clear that the civil service is in need of reform. More than half of those in the civil service are women, but just over a quarter of those in the senior civil service are women. Yes, there is a need for reform and for continued progress. If the hon. Gentleman has specific ideas about how we can advance that reform and ensure that there is positive recruitment, I look forward to listening with interest to them.

Single Farm Payment

22. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde) (Con): If he will take steps to assist the Duchy of Lancaster to assess the impact of the single farm payment on rural life in Lancashire. [443]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr. John Hutton): Yes. The duchy office has worked closely with all its tenants throughout the process of applying for

single farm payments and will continue to do so. The duchy has a strong commitment to the rural economy and encourages enterprise on the part of all its tenants to maximise the sustainable future of their businesses.

Mr. Jack: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new and important post, as far as Lancashire is concerned. His predecessor visited some of the duchy farms. What initiatives will he take to help farming take advantage of the new economic opportunities occasioned by the single farm payment, particularly in the context of safeguarding rural facilities such as rural post offices, rural shops and improved rural transport for the benefit of the people of Lancashire?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I intend to play an active role in supporting the work of the duchy office in the county palatine—which I, too, have the honour to serve as a Member of Parliament. I look forward to visiting some of the duchy tenants in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Civil Service

23. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What plans he has for reform of the Civil Service. [444]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr. John Hutton): The Government set out their programme of civil service reform in February 2004. These reforms will uphold the service's core values while delivering stronger leadership, more professional skills, including an improved ability to deliver programmes and projects, efficient use of public money and a more open and diverse organisation. A progress report is due to be published shortly.

Chris Bryant: Anybody who has ever had to deal with the civil service knows that the "Yes, Minister" caricature of a group of bureaucrats deliberately trying to thwart the will of Ministers is wholly unfair. None the less, efficiency and effectiveness must surely be the watchwords of the civil service. How can we make sure that we deal with the sclerotic tendency in the civil service without undermining the impartiality and independence of the service, which have stood the test of time?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He mentioned "Yes Minister"—but we probably all need to watch "The Thick of It" now to get the updated version of the reality. My hon. Friend's points about impartiality and objectivity are important, and will form central themes of the reforms that the Cabinet Secretary, the Prime Minister and I are taking forward. If my hon. Friend has had a chance to look at the proposals—I am sure he has, as I know how thoroughly he does his homework—he will have seen that in the reforms, we put all that centre stage. The civil service as a whole can only benefit from greater transparency and greater movements in and out of it. That will benefit the good governance of the country and probity in public life and public administration. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and all right hon. and hon. Members in taking forward those reforms. They will ultimately benefit the country, because our civil service is a national asset and we should continue to treat it as such.

Member Sworn

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:

Patsy Calton, *for* Cheadle

BILLS PRESENTED

European Union

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Margaret Beckett, Secretary John Reid, Secretary Alan Johnson, Mr. Secretary Clarke, Mr. Geoffrey Hoon, the Solicitor-General and Ms Harriet Harman, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the Treaty signed at Rome on 29th October 2004 establishing a Constitution for Europe; and to require a referendum to be held about it: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 5].

National Lottery

Secretary Tessa Jowell, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Margaret Beckett, Mr. Secretary Darling, Ms Secretary Hewitt, Mr. Secretary Clarke, Mr. Secretary Hain, Secretary Ruth Kelly and Mr. Richard Caborn, presented a Bill to make provision about the National Lottery: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 6].

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[Fifth Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [17 May].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—*[Mr. Barron.]*

Question again proposed.

Health and Education

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.35 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at end add—

'but regret the absence of measures in the Gracious Speech to reduce the burden of political targets and bureaucracy in the public services and of measures which would deliver high standards throughout the public services by promoting autonomy for professionals, creating genuine choice and removing over burdensome regulation so that new and existing providers can expand capacity and develop innovative approaches to service delivery; deplore the absence of measures adequately to support the NHS in delivering cleaner hospitals rather than just imposing sanctions on them, or to introduce a reformed legislative and organisational framework for public health; further regret the absence of measures which would take account of the proposals by the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill in the last Parliament for substantial amendments to proposed mental health legislation; further deplore the absence of measures which would recognise the need to achieve the basic requirements in education of discipline, rigorous examinations, choice for parents and the freedom for staff to do what they do best; and further regret the absence of measures which would deliver the real improvements needed in the public services.'.

It is a great pleasure first to welcome the Secretary of State for Health to her new responsibilities. I hope that she will not find that her predecessor's evident desire to move from his responsibilities was more to do with his ambitions than with a desire to leave the problems behind him. The NHS has welcomed the Secretary of State's expression of her wish to listen. She said that she would listen for months. There was therefore a certain degree of dismay when her willingness to listen seemed to have lasted about a week before she determined on the policies that she would outline to the NHS. None the less, I hope that in the course of this debate we will give the Secretary of State many things that it would be to her advantage to listen to.

Might I also express a farewell to the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid), now the Secretary of State for Defence? Before the general election, at a Labour party press conference, he called for a debate with the Conservative party on health.

Curiously, during the course of the subsequent general election campaign we had debates at the King's Fund, at the Patients Association, at the Royal College of Nursing congress and at the British Medical Association, but he did not come to join in any of those debates. That was left to the right hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) who is now the new Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and we wish him well in his new responsibilities. He served in the Department of Health for several years and I think that it is fair to say that he understood it, even if he did not admit to that.

We also welcome the Minister of State, Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the other Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne) to their new responsibilities. We are delighted to see them in the Department of Health. The hon. Member for Don Valley appears to have brought her interests with her. She has already issued proposals for football and health, so I hope that public health will be the beneficiary of her enthusiasms.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Phil Hope): She cannot vote for you.

Mr. Lansley: Next time.

There has been almost a clean sweep in the Department of Health, except for Lord Warner in the other place. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), too, is still here—I beg her pardon; I said almost a clean sweep. It is curious that the Minister in the Lords has become the Minister responsible for NHS delivery. One would have thought that we would have the Minister with that responsibility in this House. It is particularly surprising that it is the Minister who showed a conspicuous failure to act on health care-acquired infections in the course of the last Parliament who is now, ironically, to be in charge of NHS delivery.

While I have the chance I also welcome the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) to his responsibilities and, I hope on behalf of the House, thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) for his contribution in the past. I do not see him at the moment, but I am sure that those thanks will be conveyed to him. He did many services for the House over his years as a health spokesman, not least in identifying the extent of hidden waste in the NHS, which the Government belatedly accepted, and the work that he did on hospital cleanliness, to all of which I pay tribute.

The election campaign taught us many things. As one went around the country and visited places such as Dover, for example, one met people in the hospital there providing long-term rehabilitation to people living with head injuries. When we visited Kent county council offices, we could talk to staff who were developing innovative ground-breaking work on tele-medicine initiatives that are about providing not only an alert if elderly people are in trouble at home, but continuous screening and virtual consultations, so that people living with chronic diseases have to spend far less time in consultations with practitioners and, more to the point, are far less likely to be admitted to hospital.

As we visited the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital, where Abigail Witchalls is currently being treated, we saw a specialist hospital that is not only providing the finest quality of care, but doing so in old buildings that urgently need renewal—and achieving minimal rates of infection after surgery notwithstanding those difficulties. One could visit community centres, as I did in Crawley, where staff are working to support carers as well as to provide care to service users. In Derby, for example, one could meet enthusiastic staff who are designing and providing a service that is optimised for children and adolescents, and not treating children merely as young adults to be put into national health service hospitals on the same basis as adults. One could also visit Leeds general hospital and meet staff who are initiating new pilot work on the use of primary angioplasty so that instead of patients having thrombolysis when they have a heart attack, they go straight to angioplasty, opening up their arteries so that the long-term outcomes are dramatically better even than with thrombolysis. The pilot project found that a surprisingly large volume of work would have to be done.

As we went around the country, the first thing that we discovered—*[Interruption.]* Notwithstanding the apparent derision of Labour Members, the first thing that we discovered was the first thing that one discovers every time one visits hospitals, GPs and NHS staff—the commitment of those staff. Our first responsibility is to pay the fullest possible tribute to all of them.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman has spent eight minutes both congratulating people on their new appointments and going on a Cook's tour of the United Kingdom. He has already taken as long as Back Benchers will get to speak, as they are limited to 10-minute speeches. Will he get on with the debate, or is he going to speak for an hour?

Mr. Lansley: It is curious that Labour Members do not want to hear about NHS staff and what they are achieving across the country. We will come to the issues; the hon. Gentleman should not worry.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): This is a proper intervention, as my hon. Friend obviously cares about the staff who work in hospitals. Has he had a chance to look at the community hospitals in this country, and particularly at Wells community hospital, which does so much hard work on behalf of many of my constituents in the northern part of my constituency? Is it not vital that small community hospitals be given major priority?

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend takes me on to the second part of what I have to say about when one goes around the country. Perhaps the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) will think that this is a more appropriate subject for the discussion. One discovers other things as one goes around the country. General practitioners from Lancaster to Leicestershire, and in Milton Keynes, are concerned about bureaucracy and the impact of targets on the care that they can

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provide for patients. In places such as Wells and north Norfolk, or Hornsea in the Beverley and Holderness constituency, people are seriously worried about the closure of local services in community hospitals. In places such as Bury, and Chatham and Aylesford, people are deeply concerned about access to maternity services and the closures that might occur.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman referred to his visit to my constituency, but was not the most significant point about it the fact that when he tried to get into the hospital, he was not allowed through the front door?

Mr. Lansley: I do not know what point the hon. Gentleman thinks that he is making, because many hospitals chose not to let any politicians on to their premises during the general election campaign—which is their prerogative. Is he disparaging the campaign run by local people who have used maternity services at Fairfield hospital—if I discuss that matter, the hon. Member for Huddersfield will tell me to get on with my speech—because the people of Bury, North would find it surprising if he were to disparage people who want services to be maintained in Bury?

During the election campaign, I met people from Crawley to Cornwall who are concerned about the impact of deficits.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: I have mentioned Milton Keynes, so I shall give way to the hon. Lady.

Dr. Starkey: The hon. Gentleman did me the courtesy of pointing out that he visited my constituency rather than that of the hon. Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster). When he talked to GPs in Milton Keynes, it would have been unnatural if the GPs had not made various complaints, but did he note that Milton Keynes primary care trust has received record funding under this Labour Government, and that funding will be provided on projected population growth for the first time from next year?

Mr. Lansley: During the election campaign, the Prime Minister visited Milton Keynes hospital, where he said that he discovered that many women who are routinely referred for examination for breast cancer turn out to have tumours. Eighteen months before that discovery, Breakthrough Breast Cancer and some hon. Members told the Government in no uncertain terms that up to 10,000 women a year were being routinely referred, and that those women were waiting for longer than previously for diagnosis for breast cancer. The Prime Minister suddenly discovered that issue during the general election campaign. He discovered the damaging impact of targets during his visit to Milton Keynes, and it is about time that he discovered what is going on in the national health service.

Later in the election campaign, the Prime Minister appeared in a television studio, where a concerned mother told him about the adverse impact of the 48-hour target on booking GP appointments. That was news to him, although the health press reported last November that the issue was on his agenda. During the election campaign, we learned that the Prime Minister does not know what is going on in the NHS and that the Government are in denial about the effects of targets on the NHS.

One year ago, the Government were in denial about cleaner hospitals, but they have suddenly discovered that cleaner hospitals are a priority. One year ago, the NHS chief executive's report did not refer to cleanliness in hospitals or infection control. One year ago, the Department of Health annual report referred to cleanliness in hospitals by pointing out that no hospitals had a poor standard of cleanliness. That situation has changed because Opposition Members, by which I mean Conservative Members and Liberal Democrat Members, together with the media and patients—here I pay tribute to MRSA Support and others—have forced on to the Government's agenda the necessity of greater cleanliness in hospitals and improved infection control.

One year ago, the Government were in denial. The section of the Queen's Speech on health shows that during the election campaign we forced on to the Government's agenda the necessity of dealing with cleanliness in hospitals, of admitting the problems with targets, of improving efficiency and of introducing choice and competition into the NHS.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to apologise publicly to patients in north Wales for the misleading statistics provided by the Leader of the Opposition? Those statistics led an old lady to ask me whether she should go into hospital, because the Leader of the Opposition had told her that she should be afraid of MRSA.

Mr. Lansley: People the length and breadth of the country were asking, "Can I be safe if I go into hospital?" Conservative Members' objective, which we have set out time and again, is to make hospitals safe so that people going into hospital know that those who treat them have the ability to deliver the necessary standard of care. In the run-up to the election, *Nursing Times* carried out a survey of nurses, and the Government should apologise for its astonishing findings: 27 per cent. of nurses said that their cleaning services were poor or very poor; 68 per cent. said that they did not have 24-hour-a-day cleaning available on their wards; 48 per cent. said that they did not have a designated uniform-changing area; and 41 per cent. said that there was not enough time to clean beds between patients. Listening to the Government during the election campaign, one would have imagined that the fault for deficiencies in cleanliness and infection control in hospitals lay with front-line NHS staff. That has never been our argument. Our argument has been that the Government have never provided the support and framework necessary to deliver better infection control.

Let me give one example. The Secretary of State for Health has discovered that food hygiene standards in the food manufacturing industry are higher than hygiene standards in hospitals. Where was the Secretary State's predecessor when, on three occasions last year, we highlighted exactly that fact? We asked precisely when the Government would introduce hazard analysis

and critical control point technology, which is used in the food industry and which the chief medical officer said in December 2003 should be applied through a pilot scheme and an evaluation in the NHS. Has that happened? Not a bit of it. We have asked the questions time and again, and the National Patient Safety Agency, the Department of Health and other organisations talked about it in December 2003, but they do not get on and do it. The rapid review panel did not meet for eight months; there has been no urgency and no action from the Government.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Is not the real problem that only one drug will counteract the effects of MRSA at the moment: vancomycin? What is the hon. Gentleman's party's policy for replacing that drug or ensuring that more drugs are available in future?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman will know that there are a number of technologies, and I will give him one example. A company in my constituency, Phico Therapeutics Ltd, received grants—the Secretary of State for Health should be interested in this—from the Department of Trade and Industry to develop a new type of antibiotic to beat MRSA. The hon. Gentleman is a scientist so he will appreciate that rather than being a normal antibiotic, the drug impacts on the DNA of the bacterium. If the drug is successful in use, the bacterium will not be able progressively to develop resistance to it by reproducing, so it could be a very effective antibiotic. Has the Department of Health taken an interest? *[Interruption.]* It is a rhetorical question because I know the answer, which is that the Department of Health has done nothing about it. In December 2003, the chief medical officer said that £3 million would be spent on additional research to support infection control activity. I understand that as of last week, little of that money has been spent.

We learnt many things during the election campaign, but I shall now say a word or two about the specific legislation highlighted in the Gracious Speech. *[Interruption.]* We are here to help patients in the NHS, but the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope) does not seem to understand that.

Four measures were anticipated in the Gracious Speech. We have called repeatedly for action on mental health; one only has to go back to the start of the previous Parliament, when mental health legislation was promised but was not delivered. I do not dispute that the Government should bring forward legislation on mental health, NHS redress, public health and choice and diversity. They are all necessary, but there are potential problems with all of those measures.

With mental health, the starting point has to be appropriate treatment for patients and an understanding that the definition of mental illness should be clear and confined rather than stretching into other areas such as sexual orientation and dependency on drugs or alcohol. Ensuring compliance with treatment is a vital component in the delivery of successful treatment for those with mental illness, because if there is no co-operation, there is often no treatment at all. Therefore, compulsion should be a last resort.

The principles of legislation in Scotland, with which some Members present will be familiar, were set out. They include the idea that compulsion should be a last resort, and we established that principle in our manifesto. However, the Government seem instead to be working towards legislation that treats coercion and compulsion as the general choice for psychiatric services. There are enormous dangers in that approach. Instead of patients being in secure in-patient psychiatric beds, there is a real danger that they will be out in the community. By introducing community treatment orders more widely than is necessary, the Government will make them available to the services, and close in-patient psychiatric beds. As a result, patients in the community will find that the stigma of compulsion has apparently been applied to them. The assumption in the community will be that all those patients are a threat to other people, which they may not be. Many patients may well be treated in the community when in fact, they should be in in-patient beds not only for their benefit, but for the safety of the public. So there is a serious potential problem with the structure of the Government's legislation.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that another important element is access to the facilities? There is no point in pushing through this legislation if—as in many rural areas, including much of Wales—one cannot obtain the services that the Government require people with mental illness to access.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. There is a risk that the structure of the legislation will lead the Government to assume that community treatment orders can be applied. By their very nature, such orders will tend to pre-empt services, and the general level of access to services will diminish, particularly in rural areas. Action does need to be taken, and to give the Government due credit, they have tried to push measures such as early intervention. However, those will be lost as a consequence of their proposals. So I urge the Government to think very hard about their proposal.

The pre-legislative scrutiny Joint Committee rightly called for substantial amendments to the legislation, and our amendment to the motion makes it clear that we want that to happen.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I had the privilege of sitting on that Joint Committee. Given both the importance and the sensitivity of mental health legislation, does my hon. Friend agree that there are two overriding requirements in this context? First, the Government must include in the Bill all the main features and should not seek to sneak through substantial change via order-making powers and secondary legislation. Secondly, in bringing forward an important proposal that ought to attempt to command cross-party support, my hon. Friend should, through the usual channels, seek to ensure that there is adequate time to debate the matter on the Floor of the House, so that the Government, if they have the confidence to do so, can test the veracity of, and support for, their arguments.

Mr. Lansley: I am sure that all Opposition Members will agree with the latter point; in fact, I agree with the

[Mr. Lansley]

former point as well. The proposed legislation as structured relies far too heavily on order-making powers and on the use of codes of practice, instead of the relevant provisions being included in it. The Bill does not include the principles to be applied in designing mental health services, as the Scottish legislation does. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and his colleagues published only yesterday a document including independent contributions on the structure of the legislation, which I commend to the Secretary of State and to the whole House.

I shall make one or two points about national health service redress. The Government do not appear to be considering the introduction of conditional fee arrangements in clinical negligence cases beyond the point of fact finding and investigation. I commend that approach; otherwise, there is a risk under the legislation that the process of fact finding and fault finding will simply lead either to a distortion of fact finding, because it is combined with fault finding, or to fault finding simply feeding more and more clinical negligence cases that do not necessarily have merit, but are funded through legal aid. There is a serious problem with the introduction of no-fault provision in respect of birth defects. The definitions will be intensely difficult to make and where does one draw the line—during pregnancy, with congenital birth defects, or with medical accidents occurring shortly after birth? It will be extremely difficult to deal with that problem.

I have already spoken about hygiene and public health. The Government intend to introduce a provision on hygiene, which is interesting, but in the light of all that I have said about what needs to be done on cleanliness and infection control in hospitals, they hardly seem to be acting with any urgency to deliver. Indeed, they have not even acted with the urgency recommended to them by the chief medical officer, who suggested legislation to introduce enforcement powers for dealing with hygiene in hospitals. He wrote to Ministers in October last year urging legislation in the last parliamentary Session. Ministers did not act on that, but are proposing to do so now.

The problem with imposing fines on the NHS and on hospitals if they do not meet hygiene standards is that it is a counsel of despair and an admission of failure. We need a successful NHS, and during the election campaign we set out clearly how we could provide specific additional help to get technologies and other forms of support through to front-line staff in order to deliver improved infection control.

The Government are also proposing a partial ban on smoking in public places—a typical Labour Government approach in that the rhetoric is all there, but the actual proposal is utterly unworkable. Apart from anything else—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that I neglected to mention the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central, so I mention her now. Doncaster metropolitan borough council reported to the British Medical Association that 36 per cent. of their pubs do not serve food. If a ban on smoking in pubs is linked to whether pubs serve food, we shall end up with a large number of pubs, particularly in northern and midlands cities and in less prosperous areas, continuing to allow smoking because they do not serve food. It will not deliver the objective that Ministers want. In Leeds, 88 per cent. of pubs reported to the BMA that they did not serve food; clearly, the impact of the legislation will be to increase health inequalities.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): In view of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, will he give a firm commitment that the Opposition will support a ban on smoking in all public places and in all pubs?

Mr. Lansley: No, we will not—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] There are two perfectly viable ways of proceeding: either having a legislative ban everywhere, or move forward on a voluntary basis. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members jeer, but yesterday the British Beer and Pub Association announced that its pubs would get rid of their happy hours, so action on public health is already being taken. We have set out clearly that we should proceed on a voluntary basis—it is perfectly possible—to deliver an environment in public houses and other public places that is smoke-free for all those who want it and smoke-free for children. Frankly, if the Government are really interested in the public health aspects, rather than talking about a partial ban they should devote more attention to delivering effectiveness in smoking cessation services.

The evidence is very clear that the real dangers lie in smoking, in being the partner of someone who smokes or in being the child of parents who smoke. Those are the critical issues. If we can continue the downward trend in the number of people who smoke in this country, we will deliver substantial improvements in public health. That has not happened in the past few years, but it did happen—

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: No, I am finishing in a few moments.

There are many other issues to which the Secretary of State should devote herself in this Parliament, but I am not going to cover them all. My apologies to the House and to my hon. Friends if I have left out specific issues.

During the 2001 general election, the Government announced that they would have 10,000 more doctors and 20,000 more nurses, but we did not hear a peep from them about those objectives during the recent campaign. It was the Conservatives who set out clearly how they could deliver 20,000 more doctors, 30,000 more nurses and 30,000 more allied health professionals. If the Secretary of State and the Government are keen to increase capacity in the NHS—and I hope that they are—they must learn from what we have been saying. The private sector must be used more efficiently and fully, but the total health care capacity in this country must also be increased, and that means more doctors and nurses. More resources must be put in and we have set out how that could happen, not just through to 2007–08, but to 2009–10 as well.

Resources in the NHS must be used more efficiently. The Office for National Statistics has shown that there has been an 8 per cent. reduction in productivity in the NHS since 1997, but what does that mean in practice? The number of finished consultant episodes—that is, in

effect, the number of operations carried out in hospitals—rose by 26 per cent. between 1990–91 and 1996–97, but by only 14 per cent. in the six years since 1997. My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) was responsible for part of the rise between 1990–91 and 1996–9—and if that trend had been maintained, the NHS would be performing 1.4 million more operations a year.

The Secretary of State announced with some fanfare that she was going to buy 1.7 million more operations from the private sector in the next five years. If the earlier productivity rate in the NHS had been maintained, we would have had 1.4 million more NHS operations every year. That is the difference, and the key to the problem.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: No, as I am about to finish.

When the next general election is held, perhaps in four years' time, we will ask whether the resources have gone in and whether they have delivered increased capacity, efficiency and productivity through the application of competition and choice. The most important question will be whether the resources have delivered results. In four years, our health spending will broadly equal the European average, but matching the European average in respect of respiratory disease would save 35,000 more lives a year; achieving the European best in respect of cancer mortality would save 23,000 more lives a year; and doing the same in respect of mortality from heart disease would save 41,000 more lives a year.

As things stand, we lag far behind the European best. The appropriate amounts of money may be going in over the next few years, but results are what count. In the general election, the electorate told the Government the simple truth—that they have not delivered on the results. In four years, they will be held accountable for that, and they will no longer be the Government of this country.

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Ms Patricia Hewitt): It gives me enormous pleasure to take part in this debate, which is my first as Secretary of State for Health. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) for his kind words to me and my ministerial colleagues at the start of his speech, although he omitted to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who is one of my Ministers of State. However, I join him in extending a warm welcome to the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) as he takes up his new post on the Front Bench.

The health and education measures outlined in the Gracious Speech—and I shall say more about them in a moment—are firmly rooted in the values represented by Labour Members. They are the values of equality of opportunity and of mutual responsibility. All Labour Members came into politics to help create a society in which all individuals, irrespective of background, have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. We want every family to be able to give their children the best possible start in life, and every child to be inspired and valued at school. We also want every patient to feel that their health is being safeguarded and improved by our NHS.

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned her commitment to equality of opportunity. Can she explain how a headline came to be printed in *The Times* which reveals that 11,800 of the best performing pupils do well in grammar schools and the better comprehensive schools, but 16,500 are failing—after eight years of Labour Government—in inner-city and poorly performing comprehensive schools?

Ms Hewitt: I am responsible for many things, but they do not include the headlines printed in *The Times*. My understanding is that that headline does not reflect the evidence, to which the piece refers, of the way in which standards are rising in our schools—and rising even faster, I am glad to say, in schools serving our most disadvantaged areas than in other parts of the education system.

The values that I referred to are timeless, but they have to be applied in changing times, in a society in which people are better educated and informed and have higher expectations than in any previous generation. Everybody wants to be treated with full respect as an individual, with their particular needs and abilities properly recognised. So our challenge and our goal, as we embark on our third term in government, is nothing less than to create world-class public services that are fair to everybody and personal to each. That is our vision of public services for all of our people and not, as the Opposition tried to propose in the election campaign, just the privileged few.

It was interesting listening to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and reflecting on the election campaign in which we have just participated. In that campaign, the Conservatives did their best to avoid saying anything about their vision of public services and had nothing whatever to say about the economic policy that might enable the creation of world-class public services. They certainly did not want to talk about their policy to take billions of pounds out of public health and education to subsidise private provision for the few. I notice that the hon. Gentleman said nothing about those policies today. Indeed, his speech was, in most respects, a policy-free zone. He will certainly have to do better than that in the next election campaign that he intends to fight—I believe that it is a little less than four years away.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that when public money is used to treat patients of the NHS through private sector provision, they remain NHS patients? In what sense are people taken out of the NHS or the maintained education sector if the taxpayer buys better care and better education for patients and pupils from providers best placed to meet their needs? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. When someone intervenes, it is best to let them speak.

Ms Hewitt: The difference between the right hon. Gentleman and Labour Members is that the policies on

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which he stood in the election campaign would have required those who wished to take advantage of additional capacity and faster treatment in the private sector to pay half the charges for their operations. That is why that policy would have benefited only a few. Our policies are benefiting everyone within the NHS.

I pay heartfelt tribute to my predecessors as Secretary of State for Health—my right hon. Friends the Members for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson), for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) and for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid). I feel enormously privileged to have been appointed to this office. It is an enormous responsibility and my Ministers and I are extremely fortunate in being able to build on the strong foundations that have already been laid.

John Bercow: A moment ago the Secretary of State set out a noble vision of delivering the best services for all that would also be personal to each of their individual recipients. Given that in this country no fewer than 350 children are diagnosed with brain tumours each week, that only 20 per cent. of those children survive five years after that diagnosis, and that brain tumours have now overtaken leukaemia as the biggest single killer of children under 15, can the Secretary of State—aside from the inevitable party politics—say something about how the Government will improve on a record which, alongside the other provisions for cancer treatment, is not especially to be welcomed?

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman raises an enormously serious and important point and I hope that there will be many more such interventions during the debate. As I have been in office for only two weeks and two days, I am sure that he would not expect me to give him a detailed response at this stage, but I shall certainly look at what we are doing and at what more we need to do to ensure that those children, and of course their families, receive the support and treatment they need. If I may, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman with more details on that subject.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Before my right hon. Friend leaves the question of private care in the health service, will she tell me what is the Government's objective in the provision of private care? Are they expanding the use of private care facilities as a goad to NHS hospitals to improve delivery times, or as a way of ensuring that the NHS is not the only provider, or is it an indication that in the long term private health care will be treated equally with NHS hospitals?

Ms Hewitt: We are bringing more independent providers into the national health service—I shall say something about education in a few moments. In the NHS, we are commissioning more treatment from private and independent providers to raise capacity in the service so that we can cut waiting times and continue to raise the rate of innovation in the NHS, thus ensuring that patients have more choice and more control over the treatment and care they receive.

Last week, just five years through the 10-year programme of investment and reform in the NHS, we published the latest NHS annual report. The achievements it describes are remarkable. To take just one example, the waiting time for heart bypass operations is now within three months, compared with a two-year wait before 1997. Cataract patients, too, are operated on within three months; there used to be a 15-month wait. We achieved those maximum waiting times four years earlier than the promise we made in the NHS plan. Ninety-eight per cent. of accident and emergency patients are seen and treated or admitted within four hours. One million more patients are being treated in the NHS each year, and as a result deaths from lung cancer among British men and from breast cancer among British women are falling faster than anywhere else in the world. Many people said that those things could not be done, but they are being done.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What would my right hon. Friend say to critics such as those in the Royal College of Surgeons who say that moving the more routine and profitable health care procedures from the NHS to the private sector will destabilise the financial integrity of NHS provision and also reduce the availability of such routine work for doctors in training?

Ms Hewitt: The most important thing, and our starting point in all this, is the needs of the patients themselves. Both the NHS and the independent sector treatment centres are showing that where certain kinds of, on the whole, routine operations are concentrated in a single centre, far more patients can be treated far more rapidly. That is what patients want. Of course, as we introduce payment by results, we must ensure that those system reforms work in a way that does not destabilise core services that will never be available in the independent sector—particularly, of course, accident and emergency services—and we are doing that. On training, we are already in discussion with the British Medical Association to ensure that doctors in training can receive some training at the independent treatment centres, where there are some excellent practices from which they can learn.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): May I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment to a very important portfolio? She is right to suggest that the needs of patients are very important, but the needs of those who visit patients are also an issue. As she knows, charging people for using hospital car parks is an issue in Leicester and both she and I have been involved in it, as have my hon. Friends the Members for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) and for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby). Will she look at that issue, because people are concerned that they have to pay such very heavy charges and that their cars are clamped on some occasions when they visit hospitals?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend raises an issue of great concern, particularly in Leicester and Leicestershire. I have, of course, discussed it with the chief executive of the Leicester hospitals trust, as have my hon. Friends. I do not intend to issue instructions from my office as Secretary of State about how hospital trusts should best balance their budgets or how they should make provision, which we would all want them to make, to ensure that, for instance, patients who need repeated hospital treatments or people who have to visit regularly can be exempt from such charges.

We have spelled out in the latest annual report the really remarkable achievements that are a tribute, first and foremost, to the hard work and dedication of the 1.3 million staff—considerably more staff than eight years ago—in the NHS. We should be proud of those staff, just as we should be proud of the unprecedented investment that has made those achievements possible. Health service investment has doubled since 1997 and is set to be three times as much as eight years ago by 2007–08. But we should also be proud of the reforms that have made those achievements possible. We will certainly continue those reforms, such as NHS Direct and the walk-in centres—I visited one 10 days ago in New Cross—that are available to patients, whether or not they are registered with a GP, 12 hours a day, 365 days a year. That is a model of primary health care in a disadvantaged inner-city area. We should be proud, too, of reforms such as the specialist treatment centres, including the mobile cataract surgery units, that are giving patients more control and choice over their health care. All that is available free at the point of care, as NHS treatment always will be—at least, under a Labour Government.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North) (Lab): Before we move on too quickly to the great successes in the health service, of which there are indeed many, will my right hon. Friend say something about the public-private provision of dental services in this country? Does she have a plan for a new dental school somewhere such as Norwich?

Ms Hewitt: We certainly do have a plan for a new dental school. Of course, that is in addition to the 1,000 new dentists that we are recruiting this year to improve access to, and the availability of, dental services.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I wrote to the Secretary of State last week pointing out that the Government have a policy of building large numbers of new houses in rural areas and that a consequence of the centralised manner in which the Government deliver health services is that primary care is simply not keeping up in rural areas. I know of doctors in Wem and Ellesmere who are desperate for a new primary care centre—the filing is held in the shower, the parking is totally inadequate and the waiting room is totally indiscrete—so will the Secretary of State look at my letter and reply to it? Will she agree to meet a delegation of local doctors to hear about the problems that are imposed by one section of the Government building large numbers of new houses in the countryside and bringing in a new population, while her Department is simply too inflexible and rigid to cope with the increasing demand?

Ms Hewitt: Of course I will have a look at the hon. Gentleman's letter. I will ensure that he gets a reply and that his delegation is seen as soon as possible.

Despite the achievements that I have summarised, we would be the first to say that there is a great deal more that we have to do before patients and users can really be satisfied with their care. The three health and care measures outlined in the Gracious Speech will help us to meet those public expectations. All of us know of constituency cases when something has unfortunately gone wrong with patients' treatment. Such cases are not sufficiently serious to warrant the expense and anxiety of a major court case, but are none the less bad enough to make people feel quite rightly that they want an apology, an assurance that the same thing will not happen to someone else and, when appropriate, a measure of compensation. We will provide for that through the NHS redress Bill, and I believe that patients and the public will welcome the new system as a real and sensible alternative to all the problems of litigation.

Of course patients and the public have made it clear that they want better health protection both inside and outside hospitals, so the health improvement and protection Bill will represent an important step forward. It will help us to cut MRSA infection rates and to raise standards of hygiene in hospitals. Rates of MRSA infection, which we have required hospitals to measure since 2001, have been falling over the past year or so. For example, in 2003 Guy's and St. Thomas' hospitals, which do some of the most difficult and complex operations in the country, had one of the highest MRSA infection rates in the country. They took concerted action to deal with each of the problems that they identified and the MRSA rate halved within 12 months. That is one of the many examples of outstanding practice on infection control in the NHS.

As you would expect, Mr. Speaker, we are already investigating how scientific advances can help the situation. For example, we are piloting the use of a new rapid test for MRSA to speed up diagnosis. However, there is no doubt that we need to do more, so the new Bill will ensure that every hospital and care home pays proper attention to the need for the best possible hygiene and infection control. It will establish a statutory code of practice, improved inspection arrangements and, as a last resort, appropriate sanctions in the both the NHS and the independent sector, including care homes.

The Bill will also promote better health by banning smoking in most enclosed public spaces. We are acting, as the Conservative party is clearly unwilling to do, to protect people from second-hand smoke and to make it easier for people who want to give up smoking to do so. There is no doubt at all that passive smoking is a direct cause of lung cancer, heart disease, asthma attacks, childhood respiratory disease and, most tragically of all, sudden infant death syndrome. We will of course consult further on the detailed proposals, which will include a consideration of the special arrangements that will be needed for places such as hospices, prisons and long-stay residential homes.

Our constituents also want to know that the extra money that they are putting into our national health service is delivering real value, so the Bill will help to cut the number of arm's-length bodies, to reduce bureaucracy and to improve efficiency, thus saving £500 million, which will be redirected to front-line services. The Bill will modernise community pharmacy and ophthalmic services and ensure the safer management of controlled drugs, following the recommendations of the Shipman inquiry.

The third health measure in the Gracious Speech is the mental health Bill, which will replace the Mental Health Act 1983. Contrary to the statements of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, that new Bill will

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provide better protection for patients, as well as better protection for the public from the tiny minority of mentally ill people who represent a real danger. I am extremely conscious that we must balance carefully the need to protect people with mental disorders from harming themselves or others and the need to preserve their personal freedoms. Before introducing the Bill, we will respond fully to the thorough report of the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee, which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are considering carefully.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): On mental health, will the new Bill do anything to address the deficiency, which has existed for many years since the closure of so many institutions, that when people suffer acute psychiatric breakdowns, the only residential care available to them mixes them in with other people who are often suffering from such severe psychotic conditions that the in-patient care makes their condition worse rather than better? Is any step being taken to give different forms of in-patient care to people who suffer from different acute mental health problems?

Ms Hewitt: The Bill is designed to create the legal framework rather than to specify the detail of service provision in every part of the country. However, by making it possible to compel treatment if that is appropriate, and to do so not only by detaining people in an in-patient hospital, it will provide a much more appropriate and modern legal framework for the kind of treatment that the best psychiatric services want to give patients who are suffering the type of serious breakdown to which the hon. Gentleman refers.

On education, the dedication of staff, backed up by our programme of investment and reform, is achieving significant results in this sector, too. In 1997, Britain—the fourth richest economy in the world—was 42nd in the world education league. Today, our 10-year-olds are the third-highest achievers in literacy in the world and the fastest improving in maths. Three quarters of 11-year-olds now reach high standards in reading, writing and maths. That is still not enough, but far better than the situation we inherited eight years ago. On top of that, 2 million children and their families are benefiting from the new registered child care places that we have created in the past eight years; for the first time all three and four-year-olds are guaranteed a free part-time early education place—something that we will extend—and in our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, as so many of my hon. Friends know, Sure Start is helping to transform children's life chances.

In education, as in health and care, the measures set out in the Gracious Speech will build on what we have achieved. Last December, we published our 10-year child care strategy, setting out how we believe the Government should give more support to parents so that they give their children the best start in life. We will continue to expand child care services and, at the same time, give parents more choice about how they balance their work and family responsibilities.

The legislation that we will introduce in this Session will place new duties on local authorities to secure high-quality child care places in children's services that are flexible enough to meet the different needs of different families, that give children the chance to learn, play and socialise while supported by skilled and committed adults, and that provide parents with the health and family support they need. We will also legislate in that Bill to bring the inspection of children's services into Ofsted, and we will consult employers on the future of the adult learning inspectorate, with the expectation that by 2008 its functions will also be part of a single inspectorate for education, children's services and skills.

We will legislate to give a new impetus to school improvement, raising standards and increasing choice, in particular in secondary schools. As standards improve in most schools, we will raise the bar for what is acceptable performance in every school, with particular emphasis on English and maths, on providing more personal tuition so that children can learn at their own pace, neither being held back nor struggling to keep up with others, and on better standards of attendance, behaviour and—a particular thing for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills—better school food.

The Bill will introduce new powers for Ofsted and local authorities to tackle school failure and underperformance quickly and effectively. We will give parents more influence on their children's education and more power to trigger prompt action to tackle weak and underperforming schools.

Just as we are giving patients more choice over their hospital treatment, we will give parents and pupils more choice within the state education system. Over time, we want every secondary school to become a specialist school, and we will allow good schools to expand in size and influence by taking over less successful schools if they wish.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I note the glowing terms in which the Secretary of State described the education policy in England. Why, if there has been such achievement, do so many Labour Members opt out of the system and buy places in independent schools for their children? Perhaps the right hon. Lady will ask the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland why, if the Government are emphasising parental choice in this part of the United Kingdom, in Northern Ireland parental choice is being disregarded and, indeed, the views of parents are being ignored. We are seeing the destruction of grammar schools and the abolition of academic selection, which the majority of people in Northern Ireland have said they wish to retain.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Before the right hon. Lady replies, perhaps I could say to the hon. Gentleman, for his advantage and for the benefit of all other new Members, that interventions are meant to be very brief.

Ms Hewitt: I cannot help feeling that in the first part of his remarks, the hon. Gentleman was perhaps thinking of the Conservative, rather than the Labour, party. On the important point that he made about Northern Ireland, I hope that he will support the efforts that we are making to restore an Assembly in Northern Ireland so that decisions about the education provision for Northern Ireland's children can be made there.

As I said, we will give parents and pupils more choice within the state education system. We have a long tradition of independent providers, such as church and other faith groups operating within the state school system. More recently, we have seen academies opening in some of our most disadvantaged communities, many of them beginning to achieve superb results.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware of the dramatic improvement we have seen since the creation of the Madejski academy in my constituency? Since the new management regime began, we have witnessed a 79 per cent. reduction in the number of days on which students were excluded and a 54 per cent. reduction in the number of students excluded, and there have been no permanent exclusions, against five last year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the academy project has the potential to turn round struggling schools?

Ms Hewitt: I completely agree. That is exactly the kind of breakthrough that we need in the performance of schools in our most disadvantaged areas. It is partly for that reason that we will open up the education system to new providers where they can raise standards and spread opportunity locally—subject, of course, to parental demand, to fair funding and to fair admissions.

We will also introduce a Bill to provide better protection for children and vulnerable adults by creating a single vetting and barring scheme in place of the four different schemes that now exist. We will take forward the recommendations made by Sir Michael Bichard in response to the Soham murders. Checks will be more comprehensive in coverage; information will be comprehensively updated and available to employers online; and, for the first time, parents employing a home carer or a nanny will be able to check an applicant's history. That is all designed to ensure as far as is humanly possible that people who are simply unsuitable for work with children and vulnerable adults are not allowed to take up such jobs.

Finally, we will introduce a Bill to improve arrangements for children to have contact with their parents when those parents are no longer living together, and to strengthen the law relating to international adoptions. We have all dealt in our constituencies with those very painful cases where parents have separated, where the court has said that the child should have contact with the non-resident parent—usually, though not always, the father—but the contact simply does not happen. It is clearly wrong that a court order made in the interests of the welfare of the child should be disregarded by one of the parents. The Children (Contact and Adoption) Bill will give the courts more flexible powers to encourage parents to agree and stick to contact arrangements and, when necessary, to enforce a court contact order.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman says that the Bill will achieve nothing. He is wrong. Based on international experience and on the consultation carried out, I believe that the Bill will indeed help to achieve what I hope we all, on both sides of the House, want, which is for every child to have the close and loving support of both parents. The Bill will also deal with international adoptions: in particular, it will restrict adoptions from countries in which adoption procedures are simply inadequate to safeguard the welfare of the children involved.

In closing, let me stress that continued reform and investment in our public services are vital if we are to create a society based on fairness and social justice. In the recent election campaign, we were proud to emphasise not only our commitment to a society based on those principles, but our track record of achievement and our determination to do much, much more. The measures outlined in the Gracious Speech will ensure that our health and education services are firmly based around the needs of patients, pupils and their families and will give them more control over and more choice about the services they use. I look forward to the introduction of those measures, to the lively debate that will no doubt follow in the House and to the improvements—the transformation—of our public services that will follow in the months and years to come.

4.41 pm

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): When I was returned to Parliament a couple of weeks ago, I was, naturally, itching to scrutinise the Department for Work and Pensions for the seventh consecutive year, but the call came from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy), who tempted me into the health sphere, and—kicking and screaming—I agreed to take on a new challenge. It is therefore my pleasure to take part for the first time as an MP in a major debate on health.

I welcome the Secretary of State and her ministerial team to their roles or their new roles, as applicable. The House might not be aware that the right hon. Lady and I have some history—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh?"]—and later I might tell hon. Members all about it. In fact, 10 to 15 years ago, she and I were fellow members of the commission on social justice. The humble secretary of that body is now the right hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband) and the Minister of Communities and Local Government, and its vice-chair is now the Secretary of State for Health, so I think I made some good connections. The right hon. Lady encouraged me to stand for Parliament in 1997, and because I owe her that, for the first week in my new role I have not gone in too hard. I was concerned about how quickly I was supposed to come up with expert opinions, but it occurred to me that, despite having had only one week more in a new job, she was having to make expert decisions; I suddenly realised that we have both been thrown in at the deep end. Like her, I intend to a do a good deal of listening, not only for the next few months, but beyond, and this afternoon I thought it would be helpful to set out some of the key issues that I want to address in my new role and some of the philosophical approach that I bring to the critical area of health.

First, I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) for his gracious comments about my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow). As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, my hon. Friend was extraordinarily thorough and meticulous in his

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research, he raised many important issues in a fair way and contributed greatly to our debates on health. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generous comments and for his welcome to me.

I believe passionately in the founding principles of the national health service and whenever my hon. Friends and I see them being threatened, we will speak out loud and clear. We believe in universal access to the health service, free at the point of use, and we believe that one's access to quality health care should not depend on one's needs. We will uphold those principles in whatever reform we argue for, because I have in common with the Secretary of State the belief that we need a reformed NHS.

I support the additional resources that the Government have committed. That is why I was pleased in the previous Parliament to back additional national insurance for the health service. We had campaigned for additional resources. We had argued that they were needed and we were willing to take the difficult decision to support them. Yes, resources need to be put in; yes, reform is needed. However, I have huge respect for the many of our constituents who work in different roles in the NHS. They are often unsung heroes and heroines in the work that they do. They deserve to be supported.

If over the coming weeks, months and years we criticise what is happening in the health service, that criticism will not be directed at the front-line staff, who are doing extraordinary work. Very often, the criticism will be directed at the Whitehall management of the service, which is often letting us down in the provision of the quality health care that we want to see.

I reject the philosophical approach that where a public service is struggling, we should help people to buy their way out of it. That is not the answer in health or in education. We must ensure that the health service is one that the vast majority of people want to remain within because it is excellent, and not one that the state helps them to buy their way out of. That cannot be the right approach.

Where the private sector is involved, it must be on level terms. One of my concerns—this is something that I will want to investigate—is how far the Government's involvement in the private sector is on the infamous level playing field. I am concerned, for example, that some of these operation factories, some of these treatment centres, may allow the private sector to get a better price than the NHS for the operations that they undertake. I understand that the providers at independent treatment centres will get a price that is not necessarily the same as payment by results or treatment delivered by the NHS. It cannot be right that private providers will get a better deal than the NHS, especially if private providers are doing easy operations and leaving the NHS with the difficult ones.

If the private sector is to be involved, it must, as I have said, be on equal terms, and I am not convinced that it is. I am concerned that NHS money is leaching out of the system to pay for private sector profits, and as a result is not providing as much health care as it should. Investigation is needed.

I am sceptical about over-reliance on the dogma of the market within the health service. The logic of the market, if the product is called baked beans, is that if it is no good, the company goes out of business. We cannot allow NHS hospitals to start going out of business, not least because the geographical coverage is critical. If the logic is that NHS hospitals cannot go out of business, how do we have a market mechanism that says that with payment by results, people choose where they have their treatment, with some hospitals getting less business? They then suffer financially. The logic is that they cannot be allowed to go under, so that cannot be the mechanism for improving their performance. If that is not the logical conclusion of the policy, what is the market doing in its place?

In the gracious Speech we heard about choice and diversity. As Liberals, we have no problem with that concept. Who could be opposed to giving people new choices and new options? However, when our constituents come to talk to us about the health service—this is my experience—I have yet to meet someone who says, "If only I had more choice and diversity." Ninety-nine times out of a hundred they say, "If only I had prompt access to quality health care."

In my part of the country, near Bristol, my constituents have a choice of three NHS trusts or hospitals. All of them, until recently, were zero star trusts in terms of the league table mentality. If my constituents were told that they could have three zero star trusts or one very good one, we would know the answer 100 times out of 100. Unless the Secretary of State can explain how the choice mechanism will drive up standards, and if so-called failed institutions cannot go to the wall, I do not follow the logic. The priority must be prompt access to local quality care. If we can offer a choice of quality care, that is great. However, that does not come first unless the Secretary of State can explain what the causal mechanism is. I have not yet heard a convincing account from the Government of what that is.

In coming new to a subject area, one is rather like the person who sees that the emperor has no clothes and asks the blindingly obvious questions. With NHS dentistry, the rhetoric is great. However, the reality startled me when I read the answer to a question that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam tabled just a few months ago. I discovered that adult and child registration with NHS dentists is falling. I had heard ministerial rhetoric and had assumed from that that things were getting better remorselessly. As my hon. Friend said, it was as if every day was the first day of spring. In fact, the reality is very different. I was startled to learn that between 2003 and 2004 NHS dentistry registrations for children fell until barely half our children were registered with an NHS dentist, and for adults fell to little more than a third. I know that there are plans for investment, but it looks as though things have been getting worse. We as a party will pursue the goal of not merely reversing that decline, but getting back towards an NHS dentistry service worth the name. We clearly do not have that at present.

Judging by the issues about which my constituents come to see me, there have been changes in the NHS over the past 12 months that do not seem to be working. I am sure many of my hon. Friends would agree. The system of out-of-hours GP cover is not yet working. I have heard horror stories in my constituency about people who call a GP in the middle of the night, and four hours later someone is being chauffeur-driven from

Birmingham to Bristol. That cannot be a sensible use of taxpayers' money. I hope the Secretary of State's smile is a recognition of that, but that is happening now. The number of out-of-hours GPs is insufficient, yet the cost of providing the service has risen astronomically, compared with when it was provided in house. Those are the sort of nitty-gritty issues on which we intend to press the Government.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the out-of-hours service. Does he agree that one of the strange precursors of the present situation was the fact that the GPs who always used to be on call were given the option of taking a very modest reduction in their income in order to shed that major responsibility? Was not the present disaster an entirely predictable outcome of their being given that choice?

Steve Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that what has happened was predictable, not least because the primary care trusts, which are now responsible for putting in place alternative provision, do not have the budget necessary to pay for the most expensive part of the provision, which is the bit that nobody wants to do—call-outs in the middle of the night and at weekends. That was foreseeable, and I am concerned that so far nothing is being done rapidly enough to address the matter. Lives are at risk as long as the problem is not addressed.

When things go wrong with out-of-hours GP cover, there is a knock-on effect on our accident and emergency departments. Again, I draw on my own constituency experience. Our accident and emergency departments are overstretched, partly because people often cannot get a GP out of hours, so they head down to the A and E department, which was never meant to provide many of the services that out-of-hours GP cover should provide. There are knock-on effects through the system when one part is not working properly.

I want to raise with the Secretary of State the issue of accountability in the NHS. For me, that is one of the biggest gaps. Trying to establish who is responsible in the NHS is like trying to grab hold of a greasy stick. To cite another constituency example, Frenchay hospital is set to be downgraded—to use the jargon—from being a major international hospital with more than 700 beds to being a community hospital with 50 beds. I have raised the matter in debates in the House on more than one occasion. Each time the relevant Minister of State has said, "Nothing to do with me, guv. This is a matter for the locals."

That sounds great, but when one finds out locally who made the decision, it is the unelected chairmen and chief executives of the trusts and the executives of the strategic health authority, none of whom we can vote out if we think they made the wrong decision. As far as I am aware, the overview and scrutiny committees are not in the business of sacking chief executives when they make the wrong decision. When my constituents and thousands like them are confronted with a decision that they do not like about a hospital trust or an accident and emergency department, whom do they hold accountable? The money for any reform will ultimately come from the Secretary of State, yet her Ministers tell me she is not accountable for what is going on. I should like to have a discussion with her about that.

There are other important issues that we should flag up. There is a huge problem of capacity in our health service. Very often, when reform and modernisation take place, new hospitals are built with fewer beds than those that they replace. I am not convinced that, with a growing ageing population, we can get away with cutting bed numbers. Recently GPs in my constituency were written to and asked not to send people to hospital. The hospital had eight or nine wards closed because of infection, which is clearly germane to our debate, and therefore could not cope. The accident and emergency department was overwhelmed. Against that backdrop, telling my constituents that there should be fewer beds, not more, is a hard message to sell.

The NHS will try to be more efficient by driving people through more quickly, with higher bed occupancy and shorter stays, but we all know the problems with that. Linking that with the MRSA debate, there is clear evidence that driving up bed usage beyond certain critical thresholds is damaging for infection control. If beds are essentially never empty, how can standards be maintained? I am pleased that the Secretary of State appears to recognise that. When the Government came to power, bed occupancy was around 80 per cent.; by last year it was 87 per cent., and there are plenty who feel that that is too high.

Professor Barry Cookson of the Health Protection Agency has said that that high bed occupancy is related to the rise in hospital-acquired infections. He says:

"We have got to get down to 85% . . . Patients should realise that there is a certain safety level above which we start having problems."

Without going on at length about the targets culture, the danger is that one bit of the Department will say that waiting lists must be brought down and we must achieve this and that goal, and another bit will say that if bed occupancy is driven up beyond 85 per cent., 87 per cent. or 88 per cent., quality health care, another goal, will be sabotaged. I hope that the Secretary of State will oversee—dare I use the phrase?—a joined-up Department whereby a target in one area does not have a counterproductive effect elsewhere, as a plethora of targets are wont to do. Clearly we need to monitor and know what is going on, but a plethora of centrally driven targets can be counter-productive, and MRSA is a classic example of that.

Martin Salter: On the general issue of hospital-acquired infections, will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning the scare tactics and downright lies put around in Conservative party advertisements during the general election campaign? In my constituency, we were treated to two separate advertisements on two separate days giving two entirely different figures for MRSA. In the Reading *Evening Post* the figure was 161 and in the *Reading Chronicle* the figure was 69. The true figure was 38. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Conservatives have lost all credibility on this issue?

Steve Webb: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that some outrageous scare stories were put out. As was mentioned earlier, for people to be afraid to go into hospital because of an exaggerated fear of what they might get is unacceptable.

Many practical things can be done, and we await the Government's Bill. Simple measures, such as more isolation facilities, have an important part to play. There

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is the danger that if we simply penalise hospital managers or staff, who often have limited room for manoeuvre, we may penalise the wrong people. We will look hard at what the Government have promoted, but practical measures can be taken to tackle these important areas.

Having taken on this role barely a week ago it would be presumptuous of me to lecture the House on the answers to all these problems. *[Interruption.]* Not that I would usually let that stop me. But one of the critical points that I want to make is that Liberal Democrats are passionately committed to making the health service, with its founding principles, work; that there are too many cases where the hard-working individuals within the health service, who are doing their best to deliver quality health care, are thwarted at every turn, whether by centralised targets or by counter-productive instructions from the Government; that we believe that there is an urgent need for health service reform; that many of the market-driven approaches and perhaps dogmatic approaches to private provision need looking at again—but that our health service has the potential to be great once again, and we, the Liberal Democrats, will be at the forefront of ensuring that it is.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Mr. Speaker has placed a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which takes effect from now.

4.58 pm

Mrs. Siân C. James (Swansea, East) (Lab): It is with great pleasure and some humility that I rise to make this, my maiden speech. I am conscious of the trust placed in me by the constituents of Swansea, East, and I am pleased that I have the opportunity to speak in the debate on the Queen's Speech, in which we are discussing the most innovative and challenging proposals of an historic third-term Labour Government.

Being aware of the conventions and traditions of the House, I begin by recognising the contribution made here by my predecessor, Donald Anderson. His work and commitment to all parliamentary and constituency matters are legendary, and in a career that has spanned more than 30 years he has served his country and the people of Swansea, East well. His roots are deep in the communities of Swansea, but it is a less well-known fact that Donald has Norwegian blood. One of his forefathers, a Norwegian sailor, came to Swansea and settled in Aberdyberthi street, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I have often wondered whether it is this unique racial mix and the blood of his seafaring ancestors that have given Donald his interest and great insight in all matters foreign. I dare say that they were the seed of his diplomatic career and subsequent involvement in the Foreign Affairs Committee. In his role as Chairman of the Committee, he achieved recognition across the world and gained the respect of many diplomats and leaders. It is true to say that he always undertook his role with charm and ease.

Donald is known to everyone in Swansea, East, and I hope to achieve a similar level of recognition and respect over the next few years. I am confident that he will continue to play a full and active role in British politics when he becomes a Member of the other place. Lord Anderson of Swansea will, I am sure, be a working Lord, contributing his huge experience of foreign affairs and a lifetime of public service to the upper House. He has been and always will be a true son of the city of Swansea, and in his new role, he will have even greater opportunity to promote Swansea and its people.

There is much that I can say about Swansea at this point. Many people are aware of its links with Dylan Thomas, but we in Swansea, East have our own poet, who, through his music and words, will be well known to many of you. Gwrosydd, the famous Welsh bard, lived and died in Treboeth, and here he wrote the words to one of the most well-known and beloved hymns in the Welsh language—"Calon Lan", "A Pure Heart", a hymn that is sung with hwyl and often hiraeth wherever Welsh people gather to celebrate their language and culture.

The history of Swansea stretches back even further. Tradition tells us that the settlement was founded by Viking raiders and grew steadily over the centuries, but it was in the 18th century that Swansea came to prominence, with the expansion of the copper smelting industry, and it exploded with the arrival of the industrial revolution. It is a city built on the wealth of its natural resources—coal, an abundant water supply, a navigable river and, of course, its greatest asset: a supply of hard-working people willing to undertake the work needed to develop industry and sustain a growing population.

Landore, Llansamlet, Hafod, Plasmarl, Morfa, Port Tennant, Danygraig and Bonymaen are areas of Swansea, East where industry flourished. The eastern side of the town grew quickly to meet the needs of those who flocked here to work. Names synonymous with the area are Morriston, Mynnyddbach, Penderry and Cwmbwrla, which developed alongside industry and today are vibrant communities.

Recently, developments in the area have swept away the old traces of our industrial past. New developments such as the Morfa stadium, which is soon to be home to the Ospreys rugby team and Swansea City football club, have risen phoenix-like out of the ashes of industrial waste and now stand as beacons for the future. They are the visible signs of a new, more confident city that is able to meet the needs of future generations. The SA1 project is another flagship development. This ambitious project is transforming the old dockland area of Swansea, East into a place where business and innovation will work hand in hand, developing new ideas and providing companies with the ingredients that they need to create more jobs and generate further development in the city.

Working in partnership with local business people, the Welsh Development Agency and the Welsh Assembly have established the Technium centre, which is supporting a range of innovative local initiatives. The development has also attracted local companies, keen to take advantage of business opportunities. One of those is the Ethos project, which is encouraging a cluster approach to business support and will provide businesses with the environment that they need to succeed.

I am proud that those projects are in Swansea, East and that our communities are yet again embracing changes that will affect them, but deliver even more security and opportunity to greater numbers of people. It is that flexibility and willingness to develop and embrace change that enabled our forefathers to establish Swansea and help develop it as one of the major ports of Wales, and it will help to ensure that we meet the challenges of the future.

I am a Swansea jack, born in the constituency and raised in the Swansea valley. Swansea has always been the linchpin of my life and it is now the centre of my working life. I am for ever linked to the city by birth and now commitment. I believe that my political career mirrors the guts and determination of the people of Swansea. From an early stage, my parents Martha and Melbourne encouraged me to stand up and be counted. I left school at 16, married and raised a family. My husband of almost 30 years, Martin, and my son Rhodri and daughter Rowena have always been there, keeping my feet firmly on the ground. My commitment to issues affecting my family and wider community encouraged my early interest in politics, but it was the miners strike of 1984 that catapulted me into direct action and got me involved with Labour party politics.

I learned valuable lessons during that strike. I learned that I was a woman, not a mother or wife; I learned that I was strong; and I learned that I could stand side by side with my husband to try to keep his pit open and our community alive. In that year of struggle, other women and I in the Neath, Dulais and Swansea valley miners support group found a new political voice that we wanted to be heard further afield than our own community.

At the end of that bitter struggle, I was chairwoman of the south Wales women's support group. I realised that I wanted to follow a different path from that of my mother and her mother, so I enrolled as a full-time university student in Swansea and, having graduated, worked for a variety of community-based organisations. My career has involved, and always will involve, working with people, particularly women and children. My most recent post was director of Welsh Women's Aid, an umbrella organisation for 35 groups across Wales that provide services for women and children who are experiencing domestic abuse.

My association with women and children nurtured my interest in women's rights, equality issues and children's matters, which are issues that are dear to my heart. As MP for Swansea, East, I intend to promote the wonderful work undertaken across my constituency by the myriad organisations dedicated to supporting the rights of women and children. Those organisations include Morriston children's centre, which was founded to work with less advantaged families on estates such as Clase and Caemawr and which encourages community participation. The Spark centre in Blaenymaes is another first-class project, and the dedication and enthusiasm of its team, which works day in and day out to support children and their parents, are an inspiration to us all. The Gap project, which is based at Cornerstone church, Portmead, provides excellent support and encouragement to disaffected young people. At Daniel James community school, the OWLS project takes young people who have been excluded from school into the community to work alongside the elderly, which helps to develop the community.

I welcome the proposals in the Queen's Speech, particularly those that will deliver improved services to women and children. As a member of the Labour party, a community activist and, now, a Member of Parliament, I am proud of all that the Labour Government have achieved. I thank the people of Swansea, East for putting their trust in me, and I promise to work alongside them and to continue to improve the quality of their lives. I want to ensure that the issues that we all hold dear, such as community, respect and hard work, are recognised. I am committed to providing high-quality public services and ensuring that our homes and communities are safe and secure for everybody.

Finally, I want to thank an old-age pensioner who wrote to me during the recent election. In a shaky, barely legible hand, he told me why he was voting Labour and why he was telling his family and friends about our achievements. I was humbled by how positive he was about all that we have done and what a difference a Labour Government have made to him and countless others. His words reminded me what a privilege and honour it is to be a Member of Parliament.

It is possible to achieve a great deal on behalf of others, which is always the litmus test of effectiveness. When I ask myself the question, "What have I done to help others?", I want to be able confidently to answer, "As much as I can."

5.8 pm

Mr. Ben Wallace (Lancaster and Wyre) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James), whom I congratulate on her succinct speech.

This is my maiden speech. Yesterday, while I was waiting all day to be called, it struck me that a maiden speech is a bit like a first bungee jump, leap from an aeroplane or chance to walk a girl home—while one is waiting, one does not know whether one will get one's chance; while one is waiting for the chance, one is not sure whether one has done the right thing.

It is an honour to speak as the new Conservative Member for Lancaster and Wyre and to represent my constituents in this House. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Hilton Dawson, who represented the people of Lancaster and Wyre for the past eight years. He was a friendly and approachable constituency MP who always managed to get out and about, and, more often than not, he put the people before his party or his politics. He worked tirelessly for the rights of children at home and abroad and always did his best to better their welfare. I wish him well in the cause to which he has returned since leaving this House, and I will always support him in the community if he needs me to.

Geographically, Lancaster and Wyre is sandwiched between Preston and the Lake district. It is bordered on the west by Morecambe bay and on the east by the Yorkshire dales. The constituency is steeped in Jacobean and mediaeval history; indeed, the seat of the Duchy of Lancaster has been there since the 14th century. The city of Lancaster was also the first city in England to welcome the young pretender on his march south in 1744–45, so it was no surprise that, as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I always received a warm welcome from the city. To this day, the

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constituency has strong links north as well as south, and I look forward to doing my best to represent the north in this House in the south.

The constituency also has ancient history. The town of Garstang has been a market town for the past 800 years and it historically prided itself on its rural economy and trade. Now, it prides itself on being Britain's first fair trade town, and I look forward to supporting that and increasing what is on offer to the people. The settlements of Poulton-Le-Fylde and Thornton have been in existence for nearly a millennium.

The rich history of the constituency is reflected in the two local regiments: the King's Own Border Regiment, which recruits from around Lancaster, and the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, which recruits in Preston. They are well-recruited regiments with a first-class history in serving the Crown. It is a great shame that the Government, under their proposed umbrella for reform, are due to abolish those two proud regiments. It may be of note that the commanding officer of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment is perhaps due to stand trial for action in Iraq. It is a scandal that the country does not stand by the soldiers that have been sent to Iraq on Government business. As an ex-serving officer, I would say that if our senior officers are to stand trial, perhaps some people from other Benches in this House should face a similar fate.

I wanted to speak yesterday in the home affairs debate, because I wanted to point out that a major factor in the history of Lancaster and Wyre has been law and order, in which it has a great tradition. Lancaster castle is the oldest and longest continually running prison in Europe. It has housed debtors, executed witches and deported thieves. Poulton-Le-Fylde boasts some of the best examples of antique stocks and whipping posts. That is a bit too tough on crime and the causes of crime nowadays, but it shows the great theme in my constituency for upholding law and order.

On a more positive note, there are good examples in the education sector, from first-class primary schools, such as St. Hilda's and Carlton, to Garstang high school and Lancaster university. They all turn out first-class students, and the challenge for economic development in the constituency is to provide jobs for those skilled people to enter the labour market. In manufacturing, British Aerospace is south of my constituency and Glasson Grain is in it. Both struggle with fierce overseas competition and it is hoped that the Government will do more to help the manufacturing sector.

During the general election, I campaigned on three main issues. The first was cracking down on crime, especially youth crime and antisocial behaviour, which now blights all streets across the country. I wanted to campaign also for local communities to have more of a say in planning so that, as so often happens, their decisions are not overruled from the centre. Thirdly—and more appropriate to this debate—I campaigned for better access to national health service dentists. A recent survey found that only 30 per cent. of dentists in Lancaster and Wyre would take NHS patients. If all the investment is going in at the top, why can people not get access to dentists? That surely shows that there is a flaw in the plan somewhere.

It is appropriate in this debate for me to speak to the Conservative amendment, because my constituents are not concerned about who delivers their health care, but who commissions it. They want access to a GP out of hours, an NHS dentist and health visitors, and they also want their primary care dictated predominantly by their needs instead of being anticipated by the centre and targets.

I want to thank the electorate of Lancaster and Wyre for sending me here, and I shall try to do my best over the next four or five years to represent their needs. I want also to thank my association, which obviously backed me; otherwise, I would not be standing here.

I came here because I believe in defending, not denying people's liberties. I came here because many of the constituents whom I represent live on the edge of the means test. They are not eligible for any of the benefits, but are eligible to be taxed. They do not have the cushion to absorb such measures as tuition fees or higher council tax. I came here because my constituents deserve good government, not big government. During the next few years, I shall do my best for them and for the party.

5.15 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The maiden speech of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace) was a fine speech. I have listened to several maiden speeches over the past few days and I have been impressed by their high calibre. The hon. Gentleman and I will obviously differ on many issues, but he will provide us with good debate during the coming years.

I must make special mention of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James). I lived in Swansea for 13 years and taught at the university there. Indeed, I took Donald Anderson's job when he was elected to Parliament a very long time ago, and later joined him here. My hon. Friend's speech was very good and it brought back many memories of happy days in Swansea, where I still have close associations. Her robust speech makes me conscious of the fact that she will be a great parliamentarian and will fight the corner for Swansea.

It is wonderful to have a robust discussion about everything, so let us start with education, as not much has been said about it today. I want to say only three things, the first of which is that there is a remarkable amount in the Queen's Speech that I salute. It contains a great deal, and opens with a commitment to the

"long-term growth and prosperity"

of our economy. None of our achievements in education, health or any of the public services, nor anything that we have done during the past eight years, would have been possible had it not been for our successful running of the economy.

As the former Chairman of the Education and Skills Committee, I have considered our achievements in education. Part of my job during the past few years has been to scrutinise and to point out matters to the Government. Colleagues will know that when my Committee and I thought that the Government had got it wrong, we were pretty robust in our criticism—constructive criticism—of them. The Government have a very proud record in terms of investment in education,

the early years programme and Sure Start, the secondary schools programme, and skills and higher education.

That does not mean that we have accomplished everything, however. One interesting phrase that leapt out of the Queen's Speech was the commitment to achieve

"safe and secure communities . . . fostering a culture of respect."

Many of us in this House will remember "respect" for a long time to come; indeed, there is a Member of this House associated with that title for whom I do not have a great deal of respect.

On returning to the House after an election, it is sometimes important to point out not only the easy things that one heard on the doorstep, but the difficult things. I was most worried to discover on the doorstep in the recent election that although there is not an actual dislike of politics or politicians, there is an undercurrent of resistance, almost, to the democratic process. Once we start to pick up that feeling, it should worry all of us—not just the Government, but the Opposition. The feeling is not just about party politics.

As a young MP, I remember hearing Harold Wilson when he was chairing a Committee on new communications technologies. It was a time when satellite communications and 24-hour media were only dimly perceived. In the 20 years since, we have seen the rise of 24-hour media. From talking to many of my constituents I gain the impression that they feel inundated and fed up with it. There is far too much of it and they have had enough. If we think of the constant barrage of news and information that comes in so many ways and if we add to it the rather nasty tone of the last election, we gain an understanding of the problem.

I realise that the Conservatives no longer want to be seen as the nasty party, but many aspects of their behaviour during the election—their use of the Australian term, for example—made me think that they had forgotten that. I remember when I first went to Australia hearing politicians call each other liars in the chamber. We would not countenance that in this Chamber. The Tory candidate who stood against me called me a liar in his election address. I never experienced that before in all the seven elections that I fought. I thought that it was inappropriate for the Leader of the Opposition and my Conservative opponent to use that term. It feeds back to the ordinary people I talk to, who do not want the tone of British politics lowered in that way.

I also recall the Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference taking place during the election. These days, the Secretary of State and junior Ministers cannot get a fair hearing even from headmasters. We then ask ourselves what to do about disruptive behaviour in schools. My Select Committee took considerable evidence on disruptive behaviour, and it is a real problem. All the evidence that my Committee took over five years suggests strongly that such behaviour greatly reflects what is happening in society. Kids do not become different people or step into a different culture when they come to school. They bring what they have learned from outside into the classroom.

Teaching becomes the toughest job in the world when children who show no respect at home, no respect on the streets and no respect in their communities also show no respect at school. For such children, it is inevitably difficult to enter a regime in which they are expected to behave themselves, to be quiet and to allow others to learn. It is a challenging problem for our society and there are no glib answers. There is no silver bullet for improving the environment in all our schools.

I go to a school of one sort or another once a fortnight. I often find good schools, well-behaved students and an atmosphere in which pupils can learn—in short, everything that parents would expect of a school that they want their children to attend. I go mainly to state schools—I do not visit the private sector very often—and it is those schools to which I am referring. I believe that we should be proud of the teaching, leadership and environment in which most of our kids are educated in this country. It does no one any good to exaggerate the problem, though behaviour is not what it could be and there is some low-level bad behaviour in some schools, which stops others from learning.

We can probably agree on both sides of the House that what we want from our education system is quality learning in the classroom. We want a teacher to be able to teach and a student to be able to learn. Teachers, heads and all those associated with our education system sometimes need to be congratulated, not criticised, on doing a very good job in most of our country's schools. We should remember that.

I have two more points about the Queen's Speech. First, precisely what is going to appear in the education Bill is rather a mystery. We know about only some parts of it and it seems rather a miscellaneous Bill. I should like to tell the Secretary of State that the battleground for ideas and actions over the next four years may be slightly different from what she anticipates. I shall tell the House what I think, which is that we will return to what happens to children between the ages of 16 and 18. The manifesto contained a pledge that I hold very dear—that no longer will any child be allowed to go into employment without any training or educational qualifications. That is not a plea for making compulsory a school-leaving age of 18, but we must ensure that no child goes into the labour market without some educational or training guarantee.

Finally, the Tomlinson report will not go away. We must make vocational education a genuine alternative for children aged between 14 and 19. That alternative must not be a lesser choice or second class in any way, but making it available will be the challenge for the next four years.

I hope that we have a good debate on education and that new Members will continue to contribute to it when they have delivered their maiden speeches, as it is a wonderful sector in which to take an active part.

5.25 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): I begin by joining the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace) and the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James) on their maiden speeches. Sadly, it is some time since I made my maiden speech, but one's first contribution in a new Parliament is an opportunity to reflect at least briefly on the vote of confidence received from the constituents.

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

As the hon. Member for Swansea, East noted, being elected to this House should always be a humbling experience, whether it be for the first time or, as in my case, for rather more than the first time. In congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre, I must say that I detected a certain robustness of tone which I think that we shall come to enjoy in the years ahead. I look forward to his contributions to other debates, in particular in respect of matters to do with law and order and other topics for which the necessary traditions and expertise apparently still reside in Lancaster.

It is a cliché that public services lie at the heart of modern political debate, but anyone who doubted that had only to listen to the reaction on the doorstep during the recent general election campaign. That reaction, and the evidence from opinion polls, made it clear that electors considering the performance of a modern Government put the delivery of health care and education services that match their aspirations at the very heart of their choice at the ballot box. Hon. Members of all parties must take that very seriously. The signal from voters also reflects a growing disparity between what they expect to receive from the core public services of health and education and what they receive in reality when they visit a school, hospital or GP surgery.

That is not unlike what happened in the British economy in the 1970s, when a dangerous disparity developed between what we wanted to achieve and what we managed to achieve. As every hon. Member knows, that led to a radical reform of the way in which the economy works—a reform that is now common ground across the House. It is no exaggeration to say that a similar process of rethinking the delivery of health and education in the modern world now faces the Government and all political parties if we in this House are to be seen to take this matter as seriously as our voters take it at election time.

I shall deal with two sectors of the public service, apart from schools and hospitals, that illustrate some of the more difficult and uncomfortable choices that we will have to face up to. The first sector is the universities. We heard a lot during the election campaign from the Government, and a little from the Lib Dems, about how the Conservative party planned to introduce new charging regimes for public services. It is a matter of history that the NHS has three charging regimes, one for dentistry, one for opticians and one for prescriptions. Two of those three charging systems were introduced not by Conservative Governments but by Labour Governments. More importantly, and much more recently, the core public service of the delivery of university education was subjected to a new charging regime for tuition, introduced in the last Parliament by the present Government. Therefore, I accept no lectures from the Government on charging regimes in public services. Across those four specific examples, the score for introducing new charging regimes is 3–1 to Labour. That is a convenient party political point, but it has some uncomfortable lessons that need to be taken more generally into account.

We must recognise that some difficult issues must be addressed in the university sector. The British university system has fallen behind other comparative systems, in particular that in north America, in terms of available resources and the degree of comfort with which university staff work within that sector. If we wanted a university system in which professional people felt that their professionalism was undervalued and subject to too many targets, it would be hard to find a better example than our present system. That is not a party political point, because the target setting started under the last Conservative Government. We have to develop a system in which universities trust more in the professionalism of those who work in them. We need to see universities more as private sector institutions, which—strictly speaking—they are, delivering a service to their students.

I must say to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that I think that the Conservative party went up a dead end when it opposed the introduction of tuition fees. Reform of the public services involves reassessing the balance between individual and collective responsibility, and accepting that some matters that were regarded in the post-war world as the responsibilities of the taxpayer will increasingly have to be regarded as responsibilities that the individual at least shares with the taxpayer. The Government were right to conclude that the university sector was a good place to start.

The universities are one area of public service that needs to work through difficult issues. The other area that I wish to mention is NHS dentistry, for which I used to be responsible. Nobody can surely believe that the model for the provision of NHS dentistry is one that we should admire or claim great credit for. The fact is that access to public services should be one of the key determinants of whether our policy mix is right. Access to NHS dentistry is too often denied to people who should—we would all agree—have ready access to those services.

NHS dentistry is another area where the issue of charging for public services arises. It has an appalling charging regime, not because charges are always wrong but because, unlike private sector insurance schemes for the provision of medical or clinical care, the charges are imposed on the patient at the time of clinical need—despite the formulation that the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) used. If we are to introduce further charging, we must think about establishing a way for the patient to accept shared responsibility without imposing the charge at the moment that they might be put off from accepting care that they need by the financial consequences.

I raise those two services—universities and dentistry—because I do not believe that any party in the House will accept the suggestion that we should abolish all charges for them and go back to total state funding. We need to think through how we can make co-payment—that dreadful jargon word—consistent with the core principle everyone should accept: equitable access to those services for all who should have access to them, when they need them and without regard to the financial consequences.

I end with a rhetorical question: does anybody seriously believe that the issues I have raised in connection with dentistry and universities are unique to those services?

5.36 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to make my maiden speech. I compliment and congratulate my hon. Friend the

Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James) and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace), who also made their maiden speeches this afternoon. It is with trepidation and humility that I begin mine.

I choose to speak in this debate because of my direct experience of our fantastic national health service and my desire to see it flourish in the 21st century, and also to allow me to do what my constituents expect of me—to be an active and effective advocate and representative for them in the House. Today, I begin that in earnest.

My first act will be to inform hon. Members of the heritage and history of my constituency. Geographically, Lancashire West—or, as it is now known West Lancashire—borders the Liverpool conurbation to the south and Preston to the north. To the west lies the coastal town of Southport and to the east Wigan and Greater Manchester. That places us right at the heart of a thriving north-west.

The constituency is made up of several small villages, including Burscough, Parbold and Newburgh, which can be traced back to medieval England and the Domesday book, while the bulk of the population is concentrated in the towns of Ormskirk and Skelmersdale. West Lancashire is a mix of opposites: history and modernity, urban and rural, agriculture and industry, which are reflected in the type of issues that will exercise me over the course of this Parliament. They include rural transport, supporting farmers and agricultural producers, the long-awaited Burscough bypass, continued regeneration of the more deprived urban communities and the improvement and development of public services locally.

In the post-war era, a list of illustrious and infamous male predecessors have represented my constituency, including Harold Wilson, Douglas Glover, Harold Soref, Robert Kilroy-Silk, Kenneth Hind and Colin Pickthall. When I reflected on that list, the significance of my election to this place struck me. I am the first woman to hold the seat—a vindication of Labour's commitment to make the House more representative of wider society.

The recent election was the fourth successive election at which West Lancashire returned a Labour MP, making Labour the natural party of Lancashire, West. That is indeed a testament to the hard work and commitment of the local Labour party and of my immediate predecessor, Colin Pickthall—a fitting legacy. Having wrested control of the seat from the Conservatives in 1992, Colin went on to be a great champion of the people and places of West Lancashire. His approach to his responsibilities reflected a deep affection for the area even though, like me, he was not born in the constituency.

Colin dedicated his life to the advancement of Labour party values and to representing the people of Lancashire, West, both as an MP and, before that, as a county councillor. During 13 years as the MP, Colin presided over an upturn in the constituency's fortunes. Many improvements are a direct result of the Labour Government's commitment to equality of opportunity and social justice. Unemployment now stands at just 2.2 per cent. Colin has been instrumental in the regeneration effort, which has improved the quality of life for many people.

Colin played an important role not just in the constituency but in the House, where he served as a Parliamentary Private Secretary at both the Home Office and the Foreign Office for the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw). In his retirement from the House, I wish Colin and his family good health, and I hope that he enjoys having time to pursue his interest in fell walking and poetry—it is well deserved.

On health, I have many years' experience of working in the national health service, culminating in being the chair of Liverpool women's hospital—a three-star hospital, although we believe that it has five: three awarded annually by the Department of Health, another for being one of only three hospitals in the country with CNST—clinical negligence scheme for trusts—level 2 for general and maternity services, and the fifth for the foundation status awarded last April. And for the record, it has the lowest rate of MRSA for a special hospital in the country.

Health service provision is a major issue in West Lancashire. The people of Skelmersdale, for example, were promised a new hospital more than 40 years ago, but it was never delivered. However, thanks to a Labour Government investing in the health service, the area now has a magnificent walk-in centre. I can personally vouch for the excellent quality of the service, after receiving a dog bite—the scars of campaigning.

West Lancashire wants the best and safest health service that it can possibly get, and as its MP, I will take a lead in working to realise those aspirations. To put that another way, delivery must be at the heart of the Government's every thought, decision and action. We must not let this once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed modern progressive values into our health service pass us by. The cornerstones of that new settlement are being put in place—foundation hospitals, payment by results and wider public involvement. I commend the Government on introducing such potentially radical reforms. We are witnessing a fundamental shift in the culture of the NHS.

Frustration is evident among my constituents: for many years, they have felt marginalised and powerless to get their voices heard in the health service. Many of the reforms now offered give them some redress and will enable them to effect change and influence priorities. Foundation hospitals return the health services to the hearts of the communities that they serve. With greater local freedom, local choice and local accountability, hospitals are better able to meet local needs. The people who live the day-to-day experiences of the health service, either as staff or users, will now have the ability to shape the future of the health service in their locality.

We are saying boldly that we must trust the people to make decisions in the best interests of the entire community and for individuals. We must back the judgment of health professionals to use the investment in health to deliver a more effective and responsive health service. Nowhere is that better captured than in the membership councils of foundation hospitals. The values of local control, local accountability, empowerment and choice are enshrined by bringing together health professionals, local people and lay members as the strategic decision-making body for foundation hospitals.

[Rosie Cooper]

Payment by results, which represents the most far-reaching reform in the NHS in recent memory, ensures a direct relationship between what hospitals deliver and funding. However, for all my support of those reforms, I must raise a note of caution: we must implement the reforms with care and attention to detail. We must not leave people behind in our eagerness to reform. There is a responsibility to encourage people to engage with the new governance arrangements.

What I am talking about is education. The underlying threat is that information inequality can serve to entrench health inequality. As a daughter of deaf parents, I fully understand the need for inclusivity and for information that enables people to make the right choices for themselves. At the same time vigilance is needed because certain aberrations and anomalies remain inherent in the payment-by-results system.

I thank previous Health Ministers for helping me to resolve issues that I encountered during my time at Liverpool women's hospital. I hope to be a voice from the front line on the Back Benches and to bring my experience to bear constructively. A successful national health service for the 21st century depends on getting the reforms right because we will otherwise have wasted a once-in-a-lifetime, or generational, opportunity.

Foundation trusts offer the opportunity for partnership between the professionalism and expertise of health care providers and the knowledge, first-hand experience and enthusiasm of our communities. That partnership can provide creative solutions to problems that we face and ensure that we have clinical excellence and a 21st-century, patient-centred health service, which is what we all need.

5.45 pm

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is with some considerable honour and humility that I rise to make my maiden speech: honour because it is a great privilege to be elected to the House and humility as I contemplate the trust put in me by the electors of the Forest of Dean.

I start on a note of agreement with my immediate predecessor from the Labour Benches. In her maiden speech, she took issue with two of her hon. Friends—the hon. Members for High Peak (Tom Levitt) and for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire)—who had described their constituencies as the most beautiful in the United Kingdom. She claimed that description for the Forest of Dean, and I am delighted to agree with her most strongly. She did not contest the seat at the general election and I wish her and her family well in her retirement from the House.

The Forest of Dean constituency lies between the Rivers Wye and Severn in the west of the county of Gloucestershire. It has had a tradition of industry, mining, farming and forestry in the past, but its employment patterns today are becoming more typical of our county. Increasingly, more of the working population are forced to commute out of the area to work—about 40 per cent. each day. I want to focus on working to encourage more high-quality local jobs in the area during my term of office.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor but one, Paul Marland, the former Member for Gloucestershire, West and to thank him for leaving behind a very positive reputation that cannot but have helped my campaign to be elected to the House. I have lived in the Forest of Dean for more than five years and the most enjoyable thing about the years leading up to my election has been getting to know many remarkable people. There is a strong tradition of independence and individuality in the Forest of Dean, so I hope that I will demonstrate at least some of that while I am here—I hope, for fear of damaging my career for ever, that the Whip on the Front Bench will forget that part of my speech.

I understand from those that note these things that my election to the House marks the first time that a Labour Government have not been able to count on the Forest of Dean to return a Labour Member of Parliament. It is also the first time, with the current boundaries, that the Forest of Dean has elected a Conservative MP.

Probably the best known former MP for the Forest of Dean was Sir Charles Dilke, who held the seat in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He won the seat in 1892, successfully defended it in 1900 with a massive majority, and was unopposed in 1906—that is an electoral record worthy of emulation. His name lives on, as one of our two fine community hospitals, the Dilke Memorial, carries it proudly. The location of the hospital and the services that it provides are currently under review by our primary care trust. I have been contacted by many local people, an overwhelming number of whom wish to see the hospital developed on the existing site with an increased number of services available locally. I shall campaign strongly for that.

One of the issues that occupied a great deal of my interest and concern as a candidate—it continues to be a special interest for me as a Member of Parliament—is provision for special educational needs. The parties that ran Gloucestershire county council until 5 May had embarked on a process of closing special needs schools throughout the county, including Dean Hall and Oakdene special schools in the Forest of Dean.

The school closures were passionately opposed by the parents, children, heads and teachers. My Conservative colleagues and I supported them in their campaign, but were not able to stop the closures in time. The new special school to replace Dean Hall and Oakdene—the Heart of the Forest community special school—will provide education for children with severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties, and complex needs. For those children, I am sure that it will provide an excellent service and do an excellent job, and it will have my full support, but that leaves an important gap in provision.

Children with moderate learning difficulties, who would once have been taught at Dean Hall, will now be expected to cope in mainstream education. I am pleased to say that the new Conservative administration, which took power in Gloucestershire on 5 May, was elected on a pledge, and it will commission and carry out a full review of special schools provision in the county and the Forest of Dean, in line with that commitment. Once the review is complete, the council will respond appropriately. Possible responses could include increasing places at the Heart of the Forest

community special school or other options, depending on what the review throws up. I warmly welcome this commitment and know that it will be good news for many families in the Forest of Dean.

A number of children with special needs from my constituency attend the Alderman Knight special school in Tewkesbury, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). This school was also scheduled for closure by the previous regime at Shire hall. I am pleased that the Conservative administration gave a commitment to keep the school open and has started that process already. My hon. Friend should be congratulated on the vigorous campaign he waged, which is now paying off.

The lesson I learned from those experiences is that while it is right to include children with special needs in mainstream schools where that is appropriate, it should not be the only option. There are children for whom a special school is the right and best option for their future. They must be given that opportunity. As politicians, however, we must also be wary of second-guessing their parents. They know their children better than any bureaucrat or so-called expert, and we should do them the courtesy of listening to their views and be wary of prejudging them.

I conclude with this thought. My experience of the campaign to retain special needs education in Gloucestershire highlights something else, touched on by other hon. Members—the importance of voting and participating in political debate, and the impact that has on the lives of ordinary individuals in our communities. Special needs education was an example of something on which different parties had different views, and was an issue of tremendous personal importance to those involved. The decision to close or not to close a range of important schools depended directly on the votes cast in an election. Regardless of the view one takes on the issue, it cannot be denied that voting made a difference. I hope people learn from that example, get involved in political debate and participate in the process. They may not be able to change the world, but they can certainly change their part of it for the better.

5.53 pm

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): As a new Member, I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I also congratulate and compliment my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea, East (Mrs. James) and for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), and the hon. Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace) and for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper) on their excellent maiden speeches.

Like the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), whose maiden speech I listened to last week, I, too, was advised on the importance of the same three things: say nice things about my predecessor, say nice things about my constituency and say nothing controversial. In following the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore) said:

"two out of three was not bad in the circumstances."—[*Official Report*, 18 May 2005; Vol. 434, c. 223.]

I leave it up to right hon. and hon. Members to judge how I fare.

I am extremely proud and honoured to have been elected to the House by the people of Dundee, West, and although boundary changes have meant a substantial increase in the geographical area covered by the constituency, I believe that most people would accept my predecessor as being Ernie Ross.

Ernie represented the people of Dundee, West with great distinction for 26 years, and I hope that I can serve the constituency as well as Ernie did. Hon. Members will no doubt remember that Ernie's great interest during his time in Parliament lay in foreign affairs, in particular the middle east. He has made a great many friends via those interests, and is quite rightly held in high regard both at home and abroad for his work in these areas over the years.

I took the liberty of obtaining a copy of Ernie's maiden speech and in it he said that Dundee was the first place in Scotland to elect a Labour MP back in 1906. Ernie now holds a record himself as the longest serving MP Dundee has ever had. Again in his maiden speech, he had high praise for the Dundee council department then known as the direct labour organisation. Having myself been employed there between 1987 and 1997, when it had changed its name to the public works department, I can vouch for the excellent and efficient work force right up to the present day, although following another name change it is now known as Dundee contract services. Looking back at Ernie's maiden speech of May 1979, it was in many ways quite visionary. For example, it looked to the day when Scotland would have its own Parliament, which of course came 20 years later. I wish Ernie a long and happy retirement.

A new part of Dundee, West that I have inherited was formerly part of Dundee, East and as such was represented in the House for the past four years by Iain Luke. Iain is a good and valued friend of mine, and one that I know I can turn to for advice when required. Obviously, I would have preferred Iain to be here as a fellow Member, and perhaps that may yet happen in the future.

The new Dundee, West constituency also includes a part of what was previously Angus, and as the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Weir) has been returned to represent his newly formed constituency I have to admit that the advice I mentioned in my opening remarks was silent on whether I had to say nice things about a predecessor under such circumstances. The fact that he was returned surely tells its own story, and I congratulate him on that.

I have to confess that I have never met the hon. Gentleman, but I did meet some of his Scottish National party colleagues during the election campaign. My campaign team would open a book on how long it took any SNP speaker to mention the "O" word. For the uninitiated, the "O" word is oil, and I think that the record was 90 seconds. I should make it clear that 90 seconds was not the shortest time it took to mention oil, but actually the longest. On that subject, I must congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Stewart Hosie) on a fine maiden speech yesterday. I commend him not only for the content and presentation, but for the fact that he lasted seven minutes before mentioning the "O" word. Of course, the subject of oil has been in the news again recently, although not the North sea variety. I have to commend

[Mr. Jim McGovern]

the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway), himself Dundee born and bred, for his recent Stateside performance.

Moving quickly on, my constituency of Dundee, West is now a marvellous mix of rural and urban areas, business and technology parks, teaching hospitals, colleges, universities, a thriving cultural quarter and much more. Dundee has always welcomed people who choose to live and work or, study there, and so side by side in Dundee, West we now have ethnic communities, student communities, professionals in science and research and, of course, Dundonians themselves. As both the city's universities are situated in Dundee, West, the student population in particular is substantial, and not only have Dundee people welcomed them with open arms, but occasionally we try to help keep them on the straight and narrow.

A story is told of a student who was seen leaving the students union in the wee small hours, having obviously had a good night of it. A police car drew up and one of Tayside's finest got out and inquired, "Do you know where you're going sir?", to which the student replied, "I'm going to a lecture." The policeman continued, "It's half-past 2 in the morning, sir. You cannot possibly be going to a lecture." Back came the response, "Have you met my landlady?"

Also located in the Dundee, West constituency are the city's two senior football clubs, Dundee FC and Dundee United. In fact, they are situated in the same street. I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate Dundee United on reaching the Scottish cup final and to wish Dundee FC a speedy return to the premier league.

May I also congratulate two local junior football teams that will be contesting the Scottish junior cup final at Tannadice Park this Sunday. Tayport junior football club, which plays its home games just across the Tay bridge in the constituency of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), will take the field against Lochee United junior football club, which plays its home games in Dundee, West. I am sure that a great game is in prospect.

For many people, Dundee was always famed for the three Js—jute, jam and journalism. Jute and jam are now gone, but most people remain familiar with Desperate Dan, Minnie the Minx and the Bash Street Kids, not forgetting Oor Wullie and The Broons. Obviously, the DC Thomson empire is responsible for many more publications, but those are probably among the most instantly recognisable characters for a lot of people.

I believe that even in the 1950s the overwhelming majority of Dundee families would have had one or more members working in the jute industry. My mother and grandmother both worked in the mills, and even in that environment there was a pecking order: they always made a point of telling people that they were weavers, not spinners.

In the post-war years many new factories opened in Dundee, West, such as NCR, Timex and Veeder-Root. Of those companies only NCR remains, but wise investment, particularly in research and development, allied to good working relationships with the trade unions, means that it remains one of the city's major employers, and I will do all in my power to ensure that that remains the case.

What has replaced the jute mills, the jam and confectionery factories and the light engineering companies? Many new businesses have started up in recent years in the city's industry and technology parks, most making use of the help provided by the regional development agencies, and they now employ many Dundonians. Where we have seen a major upsurge in Dundee, West though, is in the numbers of people employed in research and development—for example, in biochemicals and other sciences. Many of the leading authorities in those fields are now living and working in Dundee, West, and having met some of them both before and since the general election, I am delighted when I hear the credit that they give Ernie Ross for the fact that they are in Dundee.

Unemployment is less than half what it was in 1997, so obviously we are moving in the right direction. However, one area of concern regarding employment remains; it was touched on by the hon. Member for Dundee, East yesterday. That is what people perceive as the unacceptably low number of civil service jobs located in Dundee. I would like to help to address that situation.

Full employment has to be our aim, not only in our own constituencies, but throughout the UK. Without work, there are no wages, and no wages means poverty. We must strive to ensure work and wages for all. I want to see a radical third-term Labour Government continue towards their goal of the eventual eradication of child and pensioner poverty. Of course, the forthcoming G8 conference at Gleneagles, just down the road from Dundee, must ensure a collective effort in striving to make poverty history internationally.

I intend to represent all parts of Dundee, West equally and to the best of my ability, and I say that in particular to those people who, because of boundary changes, now find themselves constituents in Dundee, West. I remember reading that Peter Ustinov, the famed actor and a former rector of Dundee university, on being asked why he had not gone into politics, replied, "I couldn't bear to be right all the time." I hope that I have the good sense and humility to realise when I am wrong, although I do remember my wife Norma once saying to me, "When you said I was marrying Mr. Right you never told me your first name was always . . . " She was joking, I think. Seriously, I hope that I have the good sense and humility to know when I am wrong, although I will certainly have the courage of my convictions when I know I am right. The people of Dundee, West would expect no less.

6.2 pm

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech, which I do with what I hope is forgivable trepidation and some jangling of nerves, emotions that are only made more acute by the excellent fluency of the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern).

I like to think that at least I will make this maiden speech with greater confidence, and that I will make myself more clearly understood than the last time I gave

a maiden speech as a new parliamentarian, which was back in 1999, when I had just been elected as a Member of the European Parliament. In my maiden speech in that place I made a joke that was, thankfully, good enough that the English speakers in the audience laughed immediately. Those who received the translation through their headphones in languages that are rapidly translated, such as Italian, French and Spanish, also laughed. I then moved on to a much more sombre point, in the middle of which the German speakers burst out in raucous laughter because, as those hon. Members who speak the great German language know, the verb comes at the end so the punch line is deferred. I cannot vouch for the quality of what I say today, but I hope at least that I do not encounter those problems again.

It is customary of course to praise one's predecessors, and I have been deeply impressed by the rhetorical dexterity with which other hon. Members have made maiden speeches in which they have lavished praise on individuals who, I assume, were until very recently their bitter foes and opponents. Thankfully, I do not face that dilemma because I stand here as the successor to Richard Allan, the previous Liberal Democrat MP for Sheffield, Hallam, who I know was as liked and admired in the House as he was in his constituency. I am sure that I speak on behalf of many hon. Members when I say that he was a Member of Parliament who discharged his duties with a unique mix of integrity, modesty and talent. He won the seat in 1997 with an extraordinary swing of 18 per cent. in his direction, and the generosity and sincerity with which he then became the MP for Sheffield, Hallam was rewarded with an even bigger majority in 2001.

Richard Allan's generosity was my good fortune in the two years in which I shadowed him as the parliamentary candidate for the constituency. I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude not only as a close friend but, latterly, as my campaign manager in the election. I am sure that, again, I speak on behalf of many here when I say that I hope his voluntary withdrawal from the political scene will prove in time to be a temporary interruption rather than a permanent departure.

Sheffield, Hallam is unique. It has the city centre just moments away, yet it flows deep into the Peak District national park. Where else can one go rock climbing one moment and attend some of the best theatre outside London's west end the next? Poets have waxed lyrical about Sheffield, Hallam. John Betjeman famously said about Broomhill, a particularly beautiful part of the constituency, that it was the "finest suburb in England". Although I know that many of my constituents might bridle a little at that characterisation and certainly are rightly anxious about the relentless and often insensitive over-development of properties in Sheffield, Hallam, they would still recognise Betjeman's accolade.

There is an unusually heavy emphasis on education in the constituency. I saw a statistic somewhere showing that the percentage of school leavers in Sheffield, Hallam who go to university is among the highest in the country. The two universities, Sheffield Hallam and Sheffield, are the two largest employers. The commitment to our great public services is extremely strong, with over 40 per cent. of all people employed in the constituency working in the education and health sectors.

I have heard it said that those who work in those public services are most likely to resist any change, however merited, in the reform, development and evolution of the sectors. Having spoken to countless nurses, doctors, researchers and teachers in Sheffield, Hallam, I flatly reject that characterisation. My view is that my constituents are perfectly aware that change is an inevitable and often healthy discipline for large public sector organisations, which are often quite cumbersome. What they object to is change driven by whimsical political fashions that change from month to month. It is worth recalling that our public sector workers are those who need to pick up the pieces when new schemes that might seem plausible when invented here in Westminster or Whitehall go awry in practice in our schools, our universities and our hospitals.

I have also heard it said that general elections are times when voters will not lift their eyes to the larger international scene, times in which everyday bread-and-butter issues will always predominate. Again, my experience in Sheffield, Hallam challenges that. I was very encouraged by the number of times that international issues, particularly the plight of many countries in the developing world suffering from grinding poverty, were raised with me on the doorstep.

As someone who is inured to the almost relentless daily diet of antagonism to all things European in much of our national public and media discussion, I was also quite encouraged by the number of times that my constituents raised the great unresolved and vexed issue of our place and our future in Europe in a manner that was measured and driven by sincere concern and interest. I would certainly like to play my part in advocating an approach to the future of Britain in Europe which emphasises a balanced and unprejudiced approach.

I do not mean to say that we should be uncritically in favour of everything that emanates from the European Union—it is as flawed as any other political and economic institution—but I have always believed that it is perfectly possible to be pro-European and, at the same time, in the forefront in advocating far-reaching improvements to the EU. However, our approach should be one that states and restates, in a forthright and unflinching manner, that we should always remember the wider benefits that will accrue to this country from our continued commitment to our European vocation.

I am only the 10th Member of Parliament for Sheffield, Hallam since the constituency's creation in 1885, but it has exported well in excess of its quota of politicians. Joe Ashton, Sir Irvine Patnick, Angela Knight and Spencer Batiste are only some of the more recent politicians from the constituency who have made their presence felt in the House, and I am acutely aware that I have my work cut out to honour the tradition that they have set. On the day of the election, with Richard Allan I visited all 19 of the polling stations in the constituency—

Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): Only 19? We have 100 or so.

Mr. Clegg: My hon. Friend might have difficulty in his constituency, but we in Sheffield, Hallam organise ourselves efficiently. I was encouraged to see the number

[Mr. Clegg]

of people who waved at us and gesticulated at us—*[Laughter.]*—with their thumbs up, I hasten to add. My joy at seeing that was only slightly dented by the realisation that all the salutations were directed specifically at Richard Allan, and they almost entirely ignored the grinning candidate at his side. It is my sincere ambition to do all I can on behalf of all my constituents, regardless of political party affiliation, so that during the years and elections ahead I may merit an occasional thumbs-up and wave. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have listened to me take my first, somewhat ginger, steps towards achieving that ambition.

6.11 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a great delight to be present on a day when there have been so many sparkling maiden speeches. As Parliament proceeds, some hon. Members might discover that debate in this Chamber is not always regarded as the most exciting or amusing pastime of the talented, so it is a privilege to listen to the new Members. They are, of course, most welcome here, each one with their own style, each one with a strong commitment to their own constituency, and each one capable of giving every one of us a tremendous boost by bringing fresh ideas and a fresh approach to this place.

After all, this is going to be an extremely interesting Parliament. When they are facing their third successive period of legislation, Governments must think deeply about their objectives. I am privileged to have been a member of the Labour party since I was 16, which of course was not very long ago, and to be present today to see the way in which my Government plan, not only to build on the exciting things that have happened in previous Parliaments, but to shape the future of the United Kingdom.

The general election provided interesting examples of the problems now facing any elected Member. Going from door to door and talking to many people throughout my constituency, it became clear to me that there is an extraordinary disconnection in the public mind between what elected Members do and have achieved and what in fact happened in people's ordinary lives. We talk about the money spent on education, but people seem to regard that as money dropped, like manna, from heaven and distributed on the ground. I pointed out to them that the fight for the just-completed primary school of which I am hugely proud had lasted 15 years before we got it going on the ground, and that the remarkable headmaster of that school had marched every step of the way with the architects to secure, not only a highly imaginative design, but one that responded to the needs of the primary schoolchildren in that area in a way that has not always been seen in the past. Only then did people recognise that Government have a strong role to play. To those of us who educate our children and grandchildren only in the state system and who use only the state system of health care, it is important to make that connection.

I hoped that we would have the odd debate on transport. Perhaps when the Select Committees are reconstituted, I might once again have a word or two to say on the subject. I look forward to the time when I, with my excellent colleagues from all over the United Kingdom, am able to examine in detail the Government's plans. Some transport topics are quite controversial—for example, the speed at which people are allowed to drive—and other parts of the transport system are equally interesting and important. Today, however, I shall concentrate on one issue.

I spent many years of my early married life involved in the national health service. Three of my children followed me into the NHS, although only one is now left—the others, quite extraordinarily, decided to go on to make money. When we examine the Queen's Speech, it is important that we ask a number of questions. Let me make it clear: I believe that the cash that has gone into the NHS over the past seven years is not only exemplary, but essential. In my constituency, we had 17 years of people saying, "Each year, we will cut the budget. We won't announce that that's what we're doing. We'll simply say that we want efficiency savings: give us those, and you'll get a much better health service." In fact, we got nothing of the sort. We got rundown facilities and primary care services that were not modernised and did not respond to the needs of the population. Since 1997, the major district hospital for my constituency—because of the boundary commission's inability to get these things right, it is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien)—has had a new mental health ward, new accident and emergency facilities, and a new eye service, which I opened. In addition, one of the new, famous and controversial special centres has been built alongside—but as part of the national health service, and specifically part of the Leighton hospital.

Let me tell the Government that, in this Parliament, they will have to think and behave differently. I am not saying that they were uncaring, but they must now think seriously about the sort of legislation that they introduce. First, they need to take more time. There are no brownie points to be gained by simply having lots of legislation. Legislation has to be good legislation, properly and carefully scrutinised, not only by the other place, but by this House. Secondly, legislation has to respond to the real needs of the people of the country.

Where the national health service is involved, the Government need to make clear where they want to be at the end of this Parliament. I am prepared to believe that, despite the large sums of money, the NHS has not responded with the speed and flexibility that some of us hoped for. I have spent my whole life among doctors and I know that, whatever they might say, they are not the most flexible creatures, although they have a high level of expertise and a great deal to offer. However, the aim cannot be only to increase throughput of patients, as if what is sought is simply a form of modernisation. That is not what the NHS is about.

I ask the Government and the Secretary of State for Health to state one or two things plainly. If we are to expand private care, what is the object? Is it a goad to produce better results within the NHS? Is it a replacement, based on the assumption that only private care provides a higher standard of care? That is nonsense. Or is it, in fact, designed to deal with an immediate problem, in the hope of bringing money back to the NHS after the problem has been resolved? If so, the system does not work like that—it never has and it never will. The Government have a special responsibility. They must tell the people of this country,

"You cannot do without a national health service. It is your right—your fundamental and important right—to have health care when you need it and not based on your ability to pay." That is the reason I joined the Labour party, the reason I remain in the Labour party, and the reason why, until the end of my days, I will fight for a national health service that is capable of responding to the needs of the United Kingdom.

Above all, the Government must be clear. We talk about a customer-led service, but what do customers do? Customers go where they can get the best for their money—not necessarily the best goods, just the best for their money. That is not what the provision of health care must be. We must have balance; we must have breadth of view. Above all, we must never find that we have created machinery which, irrespective of what happens in future—God save us from ever having a Conservative Government again—could lead us directly towards the privatisation of all services, so that we go back again to the situation that existed when I was a child. That meant that working-class people did not get proper health care. They did not receive preventive care. They did not get intelligent support. In this House or anywhere else, I will not support anything that does not understand the difference between the provision of health care and the provision of moneyed services. I will have other things to say. I am a silent creature, but I would say that it is important that the future of the health service is fundamental and clear. We need the Government to spell out their intentions.

6.21 pm

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech this evening. I stand at the far end of the Opposition Benches, but that does not mean that I have fallen out with my colleagues already. I stand here as a tribute to an ex-Member who stood in this place for many years, and that was Sir Teddy Taylor, the Member for Rochford and Southend, East, who brought me into politics about 11 years ago.

I am a former boy soldier and I was a fireman in Essex. I had an unusual incident on going into a second-floor window and coming back out again rather quickly. That terminated my career as a fireman. I wrote to my Member and said, "I don't know what to do. Can you give me some guidance on my future career?" Those who know Teddy Taylor will recognise that he was a fantastic constituency Member. He typed a letter in the most interesting grammatical way. There was a cigarette burn on one corner of the page and a coffee stain on the other. He wrote, "Why don't you come and shadow me here in the House of Commons for a couple of weeks?"

I came to this place and I took Teddy's pass for a couple of weeks. I was proud to hand back Teddy's pass when I walked into the House as the Member for Hemel Hempstead two weeks ago.

Teddy never once asked about my political persuasion. He did not ask about my views on Europe or on the health service. He just genuinely wanted to help. When I said to him, after a few months, "Do you think that I could actually make it into the House of Commons in a political career?" he said, "Why not?" I said, "I left school at 16. There are many great speakers in the House of Commons." We have heard many such Members making their maiden speeches today. Teddy said to me, "That does not make any difference. The test is whether you want to serve your community. That is what matters." I hope that I can take that tradition on in Hemel Hempstead.

I will be moving from the place where I speak on the Opposition Benches this evening in the not too distant future, not least because in my 48th year I need glasses. I will in future find it difficult to catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair without being a little closer to him or her.

I have replaced a good constituency Member. Tony McWalter was the Labour Member for Hemel Hempstead for eight years. He worked extremely hard for his constituents. He worked hard for the Select Committee on Science and Technology, for example. Tony has a great claim to fame because he asked the Prime Minister what his philosophy was, back in February 2002, during Prime Minister's questions. Those Members who were in the Chamber at the time—I was in a different position—were probably intrigued to hear the Prime Minister's reply. That was nearly two and a half years ago. I do not think that the House has quite worked out what the Prime Minister's philosophy was. Perhaps I will be able to ask him in the not-too-distant future whether he has an answer to Tony's question.

Tony replaced a great constituency Member in Robert Jones, who was also a good Minister. Having listened to so many good speeches, not least that of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), it is interesting to learn about what people believe in. If someone really believes in something, that is what matters.

Hemel Hempstead is commonly known these days as a new town—a new town that was conceived in 1947 as a London overspill town for the bombed-out parts of north London. I was born and bred in north London, in Tottenham. However, Hemel Hempstead goes back, as I am sure right hon. and hon. Members know, to Roman times. It inherits the traditional name Dacorum, which is the name of the borough council. That goes back to the time of Henry VIII, when he gave the royal charter for the borough of Hemel Hempstead.

Hemel Hempstead is not about the new town alone. Really, the constituency should be called East Dacorum because it goes from the south from the village of Kings Langley all the way to the villages of Flamstead and Markyate in the north, by the A5. Even though about 45,000 people live within the town of Hemel Hempstead, with all the problems that a new town which was built in the 1950s has, there are serious rural issues that have to be addressed.

Some new Members have described just how beautiful their constituencies are. I can say that I have a beautiful constituency. One has only to look at the Chilterns, including the Gade Valley, which is one of the most beautiful areas of Hertfordshire. I recommend that right hon. and hon. Members come to the area to spend a day in one of our local rural pubs—or two or three.

In 1947—this is relevant to today's debate— Hemel Hempstead had three public hospitals. They were in place to serve the community. When the new town was built, there was a new general hospital. So for a short

[Mike Penning]

time there were four public hospitals. That is something to which I shall return. During the election campaign, the greatest issue on the doorsteps—I hope that the Minister is listening intently—was the future of Hemel's hospital. It was built for the people of Hemel Hempstead, a new town. The other hospitals were all closed. We have a full general hospital. There is a maternity unit, an accident and emergency unit and all acute services to meet the needs of the community.

There was a big debate during the run-up to the 1997 election on the future of the hospital. The debate was won by the people of Hemel Hempstead and the Dacorum hospital action group which fought so hard for the hospital, and £60 million of investment went into the hospital. Shortly after the 1997 election—it was a big issue—the maternity unit closed. It took the intensive care baby cots with it. They went to Watford. In the run-up to the election, I was contacted by two families. The mother and the baby needed intensive care baby cot provision. That was found for them in Yarmouth and in Nottingham. No intensive care baby cots are available for the families of Hemel Hempstead in Hemel Hempstead because they were taken away from the hospital.

This is sad. We have a birthing unit in Hemel. That is all right, we think, because we have a children's ward, so that paediatricians are around. That will help if there is a problem. Unfortunately, the children's ward will open only from 8 am to 8 pm. That is a new decision, which was implemented in the past couple of weeks. The result is that paediatricians are not available at night.

All right, we have an accident and emergency department, which will have specialists for acute services. They will be available if babies, children and elderly people have problems. Well, the House will have guessed it, the A and E is to close. It is going to Watford. All the acute services in Hemel, including the fantastic new stroke unit, which was opened with 18 beds—it is down to 12 already—will close and be moved to Watford. On the doorstep in Hemel Hempstead, people are saying to me, "All this money is coming into the health service but where on earth is it going for the people of Hemel?"

It is true that we shall have a new day stay centre, and there will be facilities there for minor injuries and minor care. Many people will come in from other areas around Hemel for this provision. However, that does not help the people of Hemel Hempstead.

I do not want to be too controversial this evening, but these things matter to the people whom we represent. Violent crime in Hemel Hempstead has risen by nearly 150 per cent. in the last two years. In 2002–03, there were 739 violent assaults. On the figures available for 2004–05, 1,824 lives were damaged by violent crime.I do not blame our police force in Hemel Hempstead, which is stretched to the limit. There are no extra police in Hertfordshire this year. We do not have a single extra policeman on our streets. For every one coming in, another is leaving to join the Met. Other hon. Members have raised the matter in debates in the past few days. We must remedy the situation whereby Hertfordshire taxpayers are paying for the training of the Metropolitan police force. That was a major issue on the doorstep.

The voluntary sector in Hemel is a vital part of the community. Without it, our community, like many others throughout the country, would not survive. I shall speak briefly about an aspect which I am sure is close to the Minister's heart—the hospice movement. We need to look urgently at the funding streams for the hospice movement. It does not want to be taken over by the public sector, but it needs help.

I conclude as I began, by referring to Sir Teddy Taylor. He was known as a great constituency MP who worked for every man, woman and child in his constituency. That is what I hope to be known for when the time comes for me to leave the House at some time in the distant future.

6.30 pm

Ms Dawn Butler (Brent, South) (Lab): It is with great pleasure that I rise to make my maiden speech, days after being presented to the House. I congratulate all who have made and will be making their maiden speech during the debate on the Queen's Speech. I speak with pride at being elected in an historic third Labour term.

I made a promise to my constituents that if elected, I would be a strong ambassador for Brent, South, speaking out on local and national issues. I cannot do that by sitting quietly on the Benches, so I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity. I am grateful to the ever helpful and friendly staff of the Serjeant at Arms, without whom many new Members would never find their way to the House.

I am particularly proud and privileged to be a Member of Parliament for the youngest and most diverse and vibrant constituency in Europe—Brent, South, home to Wembley stadium. I have the honour of succeeding the right hon. Paul Boateng, who put Brent, South on the political map and raised the expectation of more than 66 per cent. of his constituents as the first black Cabinet Minister. It was even more reassuring that the first black Minister was Labour. There are many stories about my predecessor on which I could elaborate, but I have only 10 minutes. He made his maiden speech on 26 June 1987 and since then Brent has benefited from many changes under the fantastic Labour Government, although there is still much more to do.

Campaigning with Paul Boateng was a testament to how much he engaged with his constituency. When walking down Harlesden high street with him, one would think that one was walking with the No. 1 pop idol. He would be randomly accosted in the street, hugged so tight that he would become short of breath, kissed erratically all over and have sweet nothings whispered in his ears—and that was just by male constituents.

I wish Paul Boateng well as the UK's ambassador to South Africa, and I salute him and thank him for his leadership and the doors that he helped open, along with the late Bernie Grant, Oona King, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz). These former and current MPs—not all were mentioned—played a crucial role in extending the representation of our

democracy and in encouraging me as the first black female MP for Brent, South and the third black woman in Parliament. There will be many more to follow.

My first priority is to be a conscientious and diligent MP, accessible and open to my constituents. I will ensure that issues and problems brought to me by my constituents are heard and debated in the House to achieve change, as I believe that Brent, South is a shining example of integration at its best. Brent, South deserves a chance to prosper, a chance to benefit from opportunities and a chance for my constituents to live independently.

Brent, South is diverse, vibrant and buzzing, but that comes with inherent problems. Wembley and Harlesden are our main town centres and regeneration is key to bridging the poverty gap. We need highly paid jobs for local people and education to match the skills gap. Brent, South has an unemployment rate of 9 per cent., compared with 7 per cent. London-wide. However, our Labour Government have ensured that that figure has improved, with new deal helping almost 2,000 Brent, South youth into employment.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the London divide. Brent residents, like many other London constituents, suffer from a high cost of living. Labour has ensured that one in five residents have enjoyed a pay rise through the minimum wage. Returning a Labour Government has ensured that for the first time my constituents will earn more than £5 an hour, but we need to investigate the London element so that my constituents can continue to live out of poverty, with the hope of becoming home owners some day.

I am proud to represent the Labour party, which established the minimum wage, which some Opposition parties could not find time to support. The minimum wage, combined with the working families tax credit, has put on average an extra £50 per week in the pocket of the poorest families in Brent, South, ensuring that work pays and work pays the bills.

I am proud to represent the Labour party, which has pledged to end the equal pay gap. My constituency has more women living in it than men—52 per cent.—and equal pay has a direct effect on economic stability and business prosperity, and a direct correlation with child poverty. If we are serious about tackling those issues, the gap must be closed, and soon. I am confident that I will be working hard with my Government to ensure that that will be achieved.

I, like my fellow hon. Members, am encouraged by the fact that in the 2005 intake of new Labour MPs, 66 per cent. are female and 7 per cent. are black and minority ethnic. As my leader said, these are no Blair babes, as he pointed to our two expectant mothers. This is modern, progressive politics reflecting our society.

I am proud to be a GMB member and a former officer. I strive to ensure that my contributions continue to aid the historic constructive working relations between the Labour party and the trade union movement. The Warwick agreement, which was referred to in our manifesto, is another historic agreement which only the Labour party could achieve.

I end by thanking again my constituents in Brent, South for their trust in me and the Labour party. Brent, South spoke clearly on 5 May. The electorate there told the Conservatives that they were not thinking what they were thinking. With the country's largest concentration of West Indians, they told the Lib Dems that dey nah warnt dem. What they wanted was a Labour party which would deliver on its promises of equality and justice for the many, not the few.

It is my job as Brent, South's ambassador to ensure that we deliver on the Labour promises. With only 33 per cent. of my constituents in high-paid jobs compared with 50 per cent. for London as a whole, and with 24 per cent. having no qualifications compared with 15 per cent. for London, it is important that as Brent, South's MP I lobby hard to ensure that initiatives are developed and that they work in Brent, so that my constituents have a fighting chance to achieve their full potential.

I promised the youth that they would have a voice through me. We must encourage our youth, listen to them and help them to resolve youth issues. After all, they are our future. Guess what—not all youth are yobs, and not all yobs are youth. Furthermore, youths are victims of antisocial behaviour, more than any other group in our society. I will campaign and lobby extremely hard for my constituents in Brent, South to further their concerns and to put forward the case for social justice in Brent, South, the UK and worldwide.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to address the House with my maiden speech and I look forward to many other occasions when I might catch the Speaker's eye and further the aforementioned issues.

6.38 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent, South (Ms Butler) on an excellent maiden speech. She and I have something in common. She mentioned that her predecessor was accosted on the streets. Mine also was accosted on the streets, but for different reasons, which we will not discuss today.

Coming from a working-class background and a small village just outside County Armagh I am humbled, honoured and proud to represent the people of Upper Bann. I come to the House as part of a greatly increased number of MPs from my party. In the 2001 election we won five seats; now we have nine. If making gains at elections is a sign of progress, an increase of 80 per cent. is a good day's work.

Upper Bann was created in 1983. I follow Mr. Harold McCusker and Mr. David Trimble, two very different men who did things their own different ways. For my part, I shall do things my way. However David Trimble was thought of back home, and whatever verdict the people of Northern Ireland ultimately delivered on him, I know that there are many here who held him in high esteem. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I can say of David Trimble that while we were at loggerheads for the past four years, when the declaration was made and I was announced as the winner, David Trimble, in his final act as a Member of Parliament and in his first act as a former Member of the House, behaved with dignity, and I have to applaud that. Although I suppose that he must think that me saying something complimentary about him is a bit like the hangman saying, "You have a lovely neck."

Upper Bann nestles right in the heart of Ulster and contains three of Northern Ireland's largest and most important towns—Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown.

[David Simpson]

Lurgan and Portadown make up the borough of Craigavon, named after Lord Craigavon, and I have the pleasure of being the mayor of that borough. Recent Government figures inform us that in two council areas that incorporate Upper Bann, unemployment is lower than both the national rate and that of Northern Ireland as a whole. Northern Ireland was once an employment blackspot, and it is to the great credit of local entrepreneurs and the many small businesses that we have emerged from a 35-year nightmare so well.

However, those figures hide some serious issues. The entire Northern Ireland economy competes in export markets against the low-cost manufacturing bases in eastern Europe and the far east, and business in Upper Bann today centres on retail, textiles, construction, pharmaceuticals, food companies, IT and electronics. Manufacturing jobs today have been lost in Upper Bann because of the recent or potential implications of rating revaluation in the Province. We have sought to encourage new high-technology jobs, promote development opportunities and build relationships across the business community.

Today we are debating education. Northern Ireland boasts one of the best education systems anywhere in the United Kingdom. Our educational achievement has always been one of the Province's key selling points. Almost two thirds of people living in Northern Ireland support academic selection, including teachers, parents and the majority of politicians. They value an education system where the doors of grammar schools are open to everyone, not just the rich, or only those whose parents were educated at grammar schools. The new direct rule Minister should set aside the ideas and rhetoric of her predecessor and work with politicians and the education sector to deliver a system that commands support right across the community.

The Democratic Unionist party has highlighted our concerns over proposed education cuts affecting local education and library boards. We recognise the difficulty that boards are experiencing living within the 5 per cent. budget, especially with expanding special needs provision. I will continue to fight for the retention of front-line services and vigorously pursue the issues of school meals, crossing patrols, classroom assistants and safety on school transport.

In my constituency, small rural schools are threatened with closure. Loughbrickland primary school outside Banbridge and Ardmore primary school outside Lurgan face closure, despite the pleas of parents and the clear need to retain them. I urge the Government to take their responsibilities and pledges to the people seriously.

Today we are also debating health, and Craigavon area hospital has struggled to accommodate the large number of new patients following the withdrawal of acute services from south Tyrone. The introduction next year of an extra 20 beds and a new protective elective ward is greatly welcomed, but the £11 million shortfall facing the Southern health board over the next two years must not compromise plans for a cardiac catherisation lab and a 32-bed admissions unit. There is a severe shortage of allied health professionals in the Southern health board, and we seek more speech and occupational therapists, particularly for children with special needs.

I am pleased that a new mental health Bill has finally been brought forward and I am also aware of the escalating problems of medical negligence and will take a close interest in the NHS redress Bill.

As for education and health in Northern Ireland, the overriding concern is to return these matters to the control of local elected politicians in a devolved Government. Some years ago, the story was told of a new Secretary of State—we are well used to new Secretaries of State in Northern Ireland—who on his arrival was given a security briefing by senior police and Army personnel. They showed him a map of Northern Ireland, just to make sure that he knew exactly where he was, and they set about giving him all the information about Northern Ireland in an afternoon. In the process, they explained the various shadings on the map to him. Parts of it were shaded orange, which they explained were predominantly loyalist or Unionist areas. "Golly," said the new Minister, in a good Ulster accent. Parts of it were shaded green, which they explained were predominantly nationalist or republican areas. "Well I never," said the Secretary of State. As they were about to finish, he stopped them and pointed at Lough Neagh and said, "Who are the blue chappies in the middle?" That is a true story.

Northern Ireland does not need any more of that inflicted on it. We currently have direct rule because of republicans and their failure to abandon terrorism and criminality. Democratic parties are held back and the entire Province is being punished because of their unwillingness to face reality. When I met the Prime Minister last week, I was heartened to hear that he seemed to be adopting a more realistic position in this regard. We will hold him to account on these solemn issues.

With due respect to hon. Members from every corner of the United Kingdom, Ulster people are the best, kindest and most resilient anywhere on the globe today, and I am deeply humbled to have been given the opportunity to represent them here, and deeply honoured to think that they have entrusted me to do so.

I want, if I may, to leave the House with a verse of scripture. I know that it is not very popular in today's society to quote scripture, but this verse is very poignant, and if everyone would attend to it, we would have a different country today. Chronicles II, chapter 7, verse 14 says:

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin"—

and the punch line is this—

"and will heal their land."

I look forward to that day and pray that with God's help we will see it.

6.48 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney, South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my first speech to the House. I am very proud to stand here as the Labour and Co-operative party Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch. I was delighted to hear the speeches of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James), the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace), my hon. Friend the

Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper), my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern), the hon. Members for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) and for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Ms Butler) and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson). I particularly commend the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South. She has something to teach all of us new Members and some perhaps of greater experience, and if she carries on like that I am sure that her parliamentary career will be a glittering one.

It is customary to comment on one's predecessor. My predecessor served Hackney, South and Shoreditch for 22 years. At some time I will pass on to the Liberal Democrats some of his comments about their party to various Labour party meetings during that time. But I can reassure hon. Members that I shall not be following his example. I am here, and I am here to stay, as a Labour Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch.

Hackney, South and Shoreditch is a very diverse constituency, stretching from Broadgate in the City up to Dalston via the trendy bars and squares of Hoxton and through De Beauvoir town, and from Old street in the east through to Hackney Wick on the edge of the Olympic village area, via the beautiful areas north of Victoria park and Homerton, which boasts one of London's best hospitals, which takes the same name, and an Elizabethan National Trust property.

Hackney has one claim to fame in terms of the tube map, as Hackney, South and Shoreditch has one staircase at Old Street station; my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Ms Thornberry) is welcome to pass the other over in the next boundary review. That is one reason why residents of Hackney, South and Shoreditch are supportive of the East London line extension and why I support the 2012 Olympic bid, which will improve transport links, particularly on the North London line, more quickly than otherwise might have happened.

Hackney is a wonderfully diverse area, with well over 60 languages spoken by people from all continents. We have large communities from Africa, both west and east, Turkey, Cyprus, Kurdistan, Pakistan and India, and many people from the nations of eastern Europe, including those within and outside the EU. That lends itself to a range of cuisine that I enjoy eating, as hon. Members can perhaps tell from my figure. I was heartened to read in some literature from the House that there is a Members' weight watchers group; perhaps I shall join it in a year or so. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] Hon. Members are too kind—perhaps just this once, anyway.

Hackney is a young borough with a higher than average birth rate, and it is packed full of hard-working families of all backgrounds. It has benefited enormously from a Labour Government who have introduced Sure Start, the working families tax credit and tangible improvements to many of the council homes that make up more than 50 per cent. of the homes of people living in my constituency. However, in a borough that has been one of London's poorest for more than 100 years, there are still challenges in housing, health and education. In health, we see starkly the impacts of poverty, with higher than average levels of heart disease, cancer and tuberculosis. Infant mortality is higher than the national average, and something that we need to address. HIV and AIDS are also important issues, but contrasting with those problems, we have some of the best health services working on those challenges. The Homerton hospital is a foundation hospital that is rigorous in its management of finance and patient care, and the primary care trust is at the cutting edge in tackling those problems.

Hon. Members in all parts of the House have mentioned NHS dentists. In Hackney, there is no shortage of NHS dentists, but only about a quarter of Hackney residents are registered with a dentist. But the primary care trust is making a difference. Already, eight surgeries are taking up the new dental contract promoted by this Government to focus on preventive and proactive dental health care, and the trust is promoting registration. I urge the Secretary of State to visit Hackney to see how well that is working.

Hackney may be a borough of poverty in areas, but there is no poverty of aspiration there. That is one of the reasons why I welcome the three city academies that are being or have been built in the constituency. There was a need to restore confidence in Hackney's secondary school system. The combined force of a local Labour council and a Labour Government is making a difference.

Hackney faces other challenges. The population turnover is about 20 per cent. a year. I visited a primary school in my constituency just last week. In year 6, only about a fifth of pupils had been at the school since their reception class. These are big challenges, but in Hackney we are blessed with top professionals in our schools who are already solving them. I am delighted that already in this third term of a Labour Government we have hosted a ministerial visit. If my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has a problem in education, I urge her to look for the solution in Hackney, for she is sure to find it there. I applaud the Government's focus on the 14 to 19-year-old agenda. For many young people in Hackney, there is a gap between their education and the skills that they need to take on jobs in the locality.

I was the first woman in my family to go to university. My mother was the second, after she had had 10 children. There are many women and men in Hackney, South and Shoreditch who are similar, as they have had careers and families and are going back into adult education. We must not lose sight of the needs of adults while we are debating the 14 to 19 agenda. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to look closely at how further education for adults is funded, so that in east London in particular, where there is still a very great need, people do not lose out.

One of the themes of this Labour Government in their first two terms has been Sure Start. We all know about Sure Start for under-fives and the support for children and their parents. We have seen huge support and funding for primary schools, and more funding is going into secondary schools. Sure Start is there at five and at 11. We also see it in the 14 to 19 agenda, and we should see a Sure Start for adults as well—adults who need to upskill to contribute to the economic success of this country.

I am delighted to be the first woman to represent Hackney, South and Shoreditch. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke

[Meg Hillier]

Newington (Ms Abbott) is here supporting me today. Ours is the only borough in London represented solely by women. The women are taking over in Hackney, and I look forward to a similar turn of events over the years in this House. I remind hon. Members that there are still more men in this Parliament than there have ever been women in Parliament in this country.

One of the other inspirations to me has been my mother-in-law. Sadly, she died aged 88 last December. She arrived in this country as a poor Irish immigrant in 1932, aged just 16. She suffered then the discrimination that many Irish migrants have suffered then and since. As she lay dying on a London pavement last December, the hands that came to help her were those of Africans, Indians and Europeans, London's new migrants, who have contributed so much to this country. The Hackney that I know, where I travel on the bus and walk down the street, is the London where I live and the London that I see, but the world that I work in, unfortunately especially in this House, does not reflect that. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South made the point very well. We need an improvement and a greater reflection in the House of different minority groups, so that people can see for themselves that their Government reflect them.

I grew up under Mrs. Thatcher's Government. My children are growing up under a Labour Government, and they are seeing the direct benefits. I am proud and honoured to represent the constituents of Hackney, South and Shoreditch in a historic third-term Labour Government.

6.58 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am delighted to have the pleasure of following the hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who has given the House a very polished performance, if I may so describe her maiden speech. It was fluent and knowledgeable about her constituency, and there was an element of passion as well. On behalf of everybody else here, I can assure her that she will not need to worry too much about weight watchers, because she will be run ragged in her new post, as her constituents will soon find out her e-mail address; she will then not have time to go weight watchers, and she will be running around the streets of Hackney in any case.

The hon. Lady took great pride in the fact that she and her hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), as two ladies representing the borough of Hackney, represent the only borough represented only by women. It is clear on the Labour Benches that the Labour party is revelling in the idea that there are many women Members on that side of the House, but I remind the hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch that the first woman Prime Minister came from the Conservative party, and that it was she who rescued this country from oblivion. I can assure her that the ladies in this party have played an important part in the life of this country as well as of our party.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) have been able to make contributions, which I have much enjoyed. They both bring a military flavour to the House. As one who is involved in defence activities on behalf of my party, I am delighted to welcome them to the fold.

I want to raise the serious plight of the primary care trust that serves my constituency and two other issues, although I recognise that I am out of place as an old lag in a field of maiden speeches. The Gracious Speech refers to the Government's intention to

"continue to improve the quality of health services",

which implies that health services are already improving. My constituency is served by Blackwater Valley and Hart PCT, which suffered a £2.6 million deficit last year, even after it implemented a £3.8 million cost reduction programme, and is set to incur a further £8 million deficit this year.

The Government claim to have provided a very generous settlement, but half of the £13.8 million increase will go on the increased cost of the acute hospital tariff, over which the PCT has zero control. That money will not buy a single additional operation. The rest of the money will be swallowed by other costs such as the unfunded part of the new GP contracts, revised hours for junior doctors, continuing care, prescriptions and so on.

Dr. Nigel Watson, chief executive of the Wessex local medical committee secretariat, which represents GPs throughout Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, has said:

"The current situation is the worst I have experienced in 23 years of working in the NHS. The financial pressures for 2005-06 are so serious that unless significant action is taken money will have to be taken out of the system and services cut or reduced ... The PCTs are looking at reducing the whole work force, including managers, by 5 per cent. The result is that there will be no additional doctors or nurses appointed in Hampshire, and natural wastage means we will lose a few more."

That statement is a savage indictment of Government policy that flatly contradicts Ministers' extravagant claims.

My constituents are suffering as a result of the biased funding formula, which discriminates heavily against the south-east. Blackwater Valley and Hart PCT attracts 22 per cent. less funding than the national average, yet our problems are similar to those in the rest of the country, and we face considerably higher local costs. It was no mean feat to meet the targets on 78 per cent. of the national average allocation and with only £2.6 million overspend, but to fund my constituents on that false basis in perpetuity is simply unacceptable. The Department of Health now proposes to deduct any overspend in the current year from next year's allocation, which is an extraordinarily vindictive arrangement, the ultimate logic of which is that the PCT will end up paying the Department.

The second issue that I want to raise has a bearing on both health and education. The Prime Minister has suddenly discovered that respect is a commodity in short supply in this country—a message which was doubtless personally reinforced by his recent encounter with the electorate. The biggest problem facing Britain today is the breakdown in family life. It is hardly surprising that so many young people have so little respect for other people or property when they have no resident father

and when the Government pump out an incessant message about knowing your rights and place so little emphasis on accepting responsibility.

My point is graphically illustrated by this article, "Sisters pregnant at 12, 14 and 16. So what does their mother do? She blames the school", which appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday—if hon. Members have not read it, I urge them to do so. Collectively, those children receive benefits of £31,000 a year. The mother of the three girls was astonished that her daughters had become pregnant so young, stating:

"It just doesn't seem possible".

It is hardly surprising that we have so many problems in our country when that sort of activity is becoming prevalent.

According to an excellent and well-researched report, "Experiments in Living: The Fatherless Family", produced by Civitas in 2002, children living without their biological fathers are more likely to have emotional problems and to get into trouble at school, and they face a higher risk of experiencing health problems. That message may be unpalatable—unlike hon. Members who are making their maiden speeches, I do not have to be uncontroversial—even to the so-called modernising tendency in my party, but the message is crystal clear. We owe it to today's young people to rescue them from growing up in an environment that is devoid of respect. We need to frame a benefits system that rewards those who do the right thing instead of, as now, rewarding the feckless, and we need to reinforce the message that marriage is the surest foundation for raising children.

My third point relates to my principal passion outside politics, which is aviating. I have held a pilot's licence since I was 17, and I am very proud to represent the birthplace of British aviation, Farnborough. Sadly, the Gracious Speech does not refer to any form of aviation. On 16 October 2008, which is within the probable lifetime of this Parliament, we shall celebrate the centenary of Samuel Cody's first sustained flight from Laffan's plain, Farnborough. Britain remains to this day a world leader in aerospace, and the movers and shakers in that business were invariably captivated from their earliest years by the magic of flight.

Today, general aviation faces a range of threats. As early-day motion 141 and the letter in yesterday's *The Daily Telegraph*, which was signed by such legendary figures as Neville Duke and Raymond Baxter, testify, the wonderfully evocative vintage aircraft "Sally B", the B-17 immortalised in the film "Memphis Belle", is grounded thanks to new EU regulations, which demand that it be insured as if it were a passenger-carrying Boeing 737. How ironic that an aircraft that contributed to the liberation of Europe should be taken out of the sky by European bureaucrats. I hope that the EU will see the error of its ways and enable the B-17 to participate in the combined 60th anniversary VE-day/VJ-day celebrations on 10 July.

Lembit Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that example is typical of the kind of stresses faced by general aviation in the United Kingdom? This country should be a centre of global excellence for training tomorrow's pilots, but we face some serious legal restrictions. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should listen to existing aviators and try to change that dangerous and negative trend?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is right. We are making common cause because, as he has said, the Civil Aviation Authority, otherwise known as the "Campaign Against Aviation", is about to publish a new policy on charging for its inspection and licensing functions, the effect of which threatens to increase general aviation's costs by up to 170 per cent. I understand that British Airways and Monarch Airlines are driving that policy, because they want to see transparency of charging by the CAA. Today, I will do little more than serve notice that I intend to mount a vigorous challenge to that attempt to inflict severe damage on general aviation. I am delighted to be joined by my fellow aviator of 17 years' standing, my aviating friend, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik), and we hope that Government Members will join us.

The CAA is due to publish its proposals on 10 June, but we expect the victims to include those who organise air shows, because members of the Air Display Association Europe, of which I have the privilege of being president, could be put out of business by the vastly increased costs. British Airways and other airlines draw some 70 per cent. of their aircrew from the pool of those who have learned to fly by paying their own way or obtaining sponsorship from the Air League or the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators.

The airlines are apparently seeking to transfer about £1.5 million of CAA costs to general aviation, which is less than British Airways paid a few years ago to have absurd, politically correct graffiti, over which my noble Friend Baroness Thatcher put her handkerchief, painted on the tail fins of its aircraft. It is simply galling that an organisation which has just reported annual profits of £540 million is intent upon inflicting such damage on general and sporting aviation. We—this includes me, and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire—pay about £5 million in VAT on the fuel that we consume as private aviators. British Airways pays no VAT on fuel or tickets, so we more than pay our way—I hope that Mr. Rod Eddington notes that point before he returns to Australia.

The issue is not confined to those of us who engage in recreational and sporting aviation. Air displays are the nation's second largest outdoor spectator sport, attracting 6.5 million people according to the 2002 figures. I hope that hon. Members will take the time to visit their local airfields, to attend an air display, to sign early-day motion 141 and to support me, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and some clandestine operators on the Government Benches in our attempt to resolve the matter.

The Queen's Speech is a mixture of platitudes laced with inaccuracies, wishful thinking and damaging proposals. I hope that it will be challenged by a Parliament that has been reinforced with so many able new Opposition Members who are prepared to hold the Government to account over the next five years.

7.9 pm

Mr. John Denham (Southampton, Itchen) (Lab): It has been a privilege to listen to a string of such extraordinarily good maiden speeches this evening.

[Mr. John Denham]

Whatever people say about the decline of public speaking as an art, the new intake of Members on both sides suggests that it has not deteriorated as much as people say.

I want to pick up on one point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), who spoke of the expertise that she hopes to bring to health service debates in this House. In some ways, she echoed a comment about the Government's health policy made to me in an e-mail by a local general practitioner, who said:

"My concern is to maintain sufficient contact between the centre and those of us working on the ground. If messages only travel one way—top down—the richness of local knowledge and experience is not capitalised."

I look forward to the implementation of our Government's manifesto and the health service measures in the Queen's Speech, but I want to raise a few concerns about how they might be implemented in relation to the health service in Southampton.

I am in favour of choice; public services should offer choice. We want our local services to be good, but that is no reason why we should not have a choice of service to fit our lifestyle, working arrangements, family patterns and personal preferences. However, there is sometimes a sense from the Government's agenda that there is a more profound set of beliefs on choice and a set of tenets of faith. The suggestion seems to be that choice will be the major driver of improvement in public services, that a quasi-market in which the public, as consumers, exercise their choice and switch money from hospital to hospital or school to school is the best way to make choice a reality, that the same quasi-market has enough power to make providers provide a better standard of service, that providers have sufficient ability to respond to those markets to provide a better service, and that those ideas are all better than alternative ways to improve public services. Those ideas are not stated in our manifesto, but they come across in some current thinking, and I want to raise concerns about that.

First, it must be acknowledged that there is no published body of evidence to justify that series of claims. I hope that the Government will be more transparent on this area of policy making in the future. We know, for example, that the NHS pays over the odds for private sector operations to build up the capacity of the private sector so that there will be greater future efficiencies from more contestability. The Government should publish the evidence on which their current investment is judged so that we know what we will get for the money that goes in.

My second concern is that in the pursuit of that series of quasi-market changes, the immediate danger is that we end up with a mish-mash and hotch-potch of market and non-market approaches to public sector management—a bit of socialist planning, a bit of state capitalism and a bit of liberal markets. That makes it hard to work out how it all fits together.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that that system also leads to inefficiency? In my local hospital there is a brand new £97 million magnetic resonance imaging scanner, of which we are very proud. It is not being used, yet the private sector is bringing a van into the car park of a neighbouring hospital to carry out scanning. If that money was directed to the new capacity at my local hospital, it would be far more efficient than trying to generate the so-called market to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Mr. Denham: I was going to make the observation that we know that expanding private sector capacity works in particular circumstances. For example, there is no doubt that the development of a direct treatment centre in the private sector in Salisbury has cut orthopaedic waiting times in Southampton. However, we cannot generalise that experience to say that investing in private sector capacity will always produce benefits.

I want to address the dilemma that we face in Southampton. I shall not go into great detail, but I hope that the House will take it that there has been a huge amount of good news. Long waits have been slashed, the great majority of clinical targets have been met, there has been expansion and innovation in primary care, and there have been good public health gains such as falls in teenage pregnancy. However, the current challenges are huge. The combined deficit of the local health economy—the main hospital trust and the three primary care trusts—is £30 million, which puts the issues of the Blackwater valley into perspective. That figure will rise; it is only that low because of one-off financial savings.

There is a consensus in the area that the problem is not overall NHS underfunding, but that investment has come in and the reforms necessary to use it efficiently have not been made. In other words, only half of the message of investment and reform was carried out. There is broad agreement on what needs to be done: we need to make more efficient use of beds in the hospitals. However, it is challenging to build up the community care capacity in the face of those deficits. We need better co-ordination of services between Southampton and Winchester—two major hospital trusts. That is not easy politically, perhaps less so for the residents of Winchester than those of Southampton because the former may have to travel further for some services. We need improved commissioning of primary care and further improvements in the capacity of primary care trusts to plan and develop new services in new ways. That is happening, but probably not fast enough.

We must deal with those problems in the next three years, before the pace of NHS expansion slows. They can be dealt with, but the process will be fairly painful and will require exceptional leadership. I am particularly pleased that Sir Ian Carruthers, who was the head of the Dorset strategic health authority, has been seconded to our area to assist.

The challenge for this Labour Government, whom I support wholeheartedly, is to manage their new reforms without making the challenges in the Southampton area more difficult than necessary. Some individual reforms are going well. Practice-based commissioning seems to be going well within the overall PCT approach. Targets, which are much maligned—I have maligned them myself sometimes—have driven some real improvements in the quality of service. As I mentioned earlier, the use of private sector capacity in Salisbury has helped. However, it is

brave to make the leap from those individual success stories in reform to assume that the whole picture is as coherent as it needs to be. We must remember that the health economy needs to make a reduction in its overall costs of at least £30 million a year, while not only protecting but improving patient services. That will mean a massive change in the organisation of services.

The people who have to deal with the problem not only have to deal with central targets and PCT commissioning, they have to work with the commissioning of new capacity in independent surgical treatment centres, with payment by results, and with patient choice. The rules for each are different. The independent sector gets money under different rules, without competition, and at a higher cost than NHS hospitals. The way that NHS hospitals get money depends on whether they are foundation trusts. Payment by results and patient choice leads to a bewildering range of possible outcomes depending on the effectiveness of PCTs, the choices made by patients, the cost-effectiveness of hospitals, and the extent of gaming and dysfunctional activity in the new market. Tertiary care—the world-class services that the university hospital trust offers to patients from all over the country—is inadequately and unpredictably funded under the current regime.

In a steady state, those different elements might not be a problem, and market signals alone might produce a more effective configuration of services. However, the bewildering range of outcomes that one can envisage over the next three years will directly affect the confidence of the system to make much-needed investment, for example, in better community facilities for the elderly. It also brings the danger that areas not as subject to market forces, particularly mental health services, will be stripped out to make up the shortage of money in other areas.

Much as I support the broad thrust of everything that the Government are doing on the NHS, I fear that we may end up with a curious mixture of the worst of the old and the new. The old central planning mechanisms, with all their flaws, may have been sufficiently weakened to prevent the necessary radical changes, and the new flows of money may create instability when long-term certainty is needed. Many individual reforms are working well. However, pushing market reforms blindly, without looking at the capacity of the local NHS to accommodate those changes, may overload the system and the decision makers in it.

I finish with a plea to Ministers to examine carefully areas such as Southampton and the challenges that we face, and to bring in the new reforms and greater patient choice at the right pace and with sensitivity to challenges on the ground. Let us make sure that the underlying structural changes are in place before expecting patient choice to work fully. If we do not, I fear that there may be some perverse outcomes that we will find difficult to defend. We could experience difficulties—not in the short term but in the longer term—if operations in private hospitals cost more than in NHS hospitals and the latter are closing their own wards. We could experience problems if there are conflicts between care trusts and providers as deficits are pushed from one to the other, along with the possible undermining of long-term investment in the management of chronic disease.

I have raised these points in a fairly straightforward way this evening. Much of what the Government have done in the NHS has been tremendous. My worry is that we are pushing untested policies into the system so fast that in areas such as mine, which face critical challenges, it may prove more than the system can take.

7.21 pm

Mr. Jeremy Hunt (South-West Surrey) (Con): I congratulate the many new Members who have made their maiden contributions this evening. The hon. Members for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and for Brent, South (Ms Butler) expressed great pride at being the first women to represent their constituencies, and I am particularly proud to be the first man to represent mine in more than 20 years. I am also proud to be standing next to my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton). She worked extremely hard to win her seat, and no one is prouder than I am to be with her this evening. [HON. MEMBERS: "Love on the Benches!"] I believe that my hon. Friend is married.

Let me now undertake the enormously pleasurable task of paying tribute to my predecessor, Virginia Bottomley. This House will know that she played a distinguished role on the national stage as Secretary of State for Health and as Secretary of State for the then Department of National Heritage. The House may be less aware that she was also a hugely conscientious constituency MP, a determined champion of local causes and a passionate advocate of the many charities and voluntary organisations in my constituency. She is also immensely photogenic and cuts a wonderful dash in the hills of Haslemere, the gardens of Godalming and the fetes of Farnham. That, I fear, is an area in which I will be unable to follow in her distinguished footsteps.

The Minister for Schools (Jacqui Smith): You're not so bad yourself.

Mr. Hunt: I am grateful for that compliment from the Labour Benches; I fear that that may be the end of them.

My constituency consists of three historic towns and a number of villages that lie between them. Farnham is the largest of the towns, Haslemere is a town of great charm and character, and Godalming has a special place in my heart as I went to school there and my family are originally from there. My late grandmother was still alive when I was selected as a prospective parliamentary candidate, and no one could be happier than she would have been to see me standing here today.

In many ways, both the problems and the opportunities in my constituency reside in the same fact: we are only an hour from London. That creates not only huge economic opportunities—more than half the working population in my constituency commute to London—but huge development pressures that threaten the special character of my constituency's towns and villages. I do not wish to depart from the tradition of not being controversial in a maiden speech, but I want to let the House know that I will be campaigning vigorously against the housing targets set for my constituency by the Deputy Prime Minister, who used as his vehicle the unelected, unwanted and unnecessary South East England regional assembly.

[Mr. Hunt]

I will also be campaigning strongly for a tunnel for the A3 at Hindhead. There is a huge traffic bottleneck there and enormous problems for traffic coming from London to Portsmouth. The tunnel is a project of national importance, and I urge the Government to reconsider their decision last December effectively to withdraw funding for it.

The final issue currently of great concern to my constituents is the future of Milford hospital, which is a specialist rehabilitation hospital. More than a quarter of my constituents are retired, and the demand for the services offered by Milford is only likely to increase. However, I am told by my primary care trust that a short-term cash crisis leaves its potential future funding in doubt. I will be campaigning very strongly, locally and nationally, to ensure that Milford hospital does not become a victim of that cash crisis.

My own background is in education. With a business partner—he is in the Gallery—I set up an educational publishing business that produces guides and websites to help people choose the right university, college or course. I will mention it in the Register of Members' Interests, and I declare it today because I want to say something about education. I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for Education for sparing time from her schedule, and for making the effort to come and listen to what I have to say.

We live in a highly competitive world, and most Members in all parts of the House would accept that some inequality is the inevitable consequence of maintaining the link between effort and reward in our society. But given that that is so, there is surely not just an economic necessity but a moral duty to ensure that we give every child in this country the best possible start in life.

As a prospective parliamentary candidate, I followed in the footsteps of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short) and did a week as a teacher in a local secondary school; I also did a week as a classroom assistant in a primary school. I welcome some of the changes in education that we have seen in the past eight years, particularly the literacy and numeracy hours, which have been important contributions. However, if we are to address the shortfalls in our education system, we have to recognise that it is not just a question of funding; we also need a disciplined learning environment and academic rigor. Respect for teachers is vital, but we also need to pay due attention to academic standards. If everyone gets a prize, in the end the prize itself becomes worthless, and the people who suffer most are those with the least. For them, a credible exam result is the very passport that they need to help them to break out of the cycle of low expectations with which they may well have grown up.

I come briefly to education in the third world, given that the developing world will be discussed at the forthcoming G8 summit. I was recently involved in setting up a charity to fund education for AIDS orphans in Kenya. I did so after sponsoring an HIV-positive child for a couple of years, and I make no apology to the House for coming to the problems of Africa through the prism of a small child's experience, because in the end this is about individuals and individual suffering.

I was greatly helped in setting up that charity by Estelle Morris, who was willing to work across party lines to help me get it off the ground. She once said to me, "Jeremy, you care a lot about education and you care about the developing world. Just why are you a Conservative?", to which I say this: no party has a monopoly on compassion—the challenge is how to apply that compassion in a modern context. For my part, compassion alone is not enough; it needs to benefit the people to whom it is directed. Compassion should lead to independence for those who lack it, to freedom for those who need it and to opportunity for those who crave it. Creating opportunities for those who really need them—whether in this country or in the developing world—will be a major preoccupation of mine for as long as the people of South-West Surrey give me the privilege of representing them in this House.

7.29 pm

Ms Diana R. Johnson (Kingston upon Hull, North) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am delighted to make my maiden speech to the House on a debate about education and health—two key issues for my constituency. First, however, I want to congratulate new hon. Members on their maiden speeches today. I greatly enjoyed hearing the speeches over the last few hours and we have ranged from Swansea, East to Dundee, West and Brent, South, which has been a real education. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mr. Hunt), who provided an interesting tour of his constituency and spoke with authority on education both here and abroad. I wish him every success in his parliamentary career.

My constituency of Kingston upon Hull, North is situated in a proud and famous city, which continues to play an important role in the political life of the nation. I want to commence by paying tribute to my predecessor, Kevin McNamara, and then to explain a little of Hull's history and what is happening there today.

Kevin first entered Parliament as the MP for Hull, North in the famous and hard-fought by-election of January 1966. At that stage, Harold Wilson had a majority of just three MPs, which puts Labour's majority of 67 on 5 May this year in its proper context. Kevin's victory in the by-election convinced Harold Wilson that he should go to the country just a few months later—and the rest, as they say, is history, when a Labour Government was returned with a much increased majority. One of my constituents, Mrs. Jean Oxley, who worked tirelessly for Kevin in the by-election, even wrote to Harold Wilson, saying that Labour supporters were quite exhausted after the campaign and asking whether he could bear that in mind in thinking about calling a general election. It is to be noted that Jean, though exhausted in 1966, is still going strong, and at the age of 94 she nominated me as the Labour candidate in the general election.

Kevin served the area for the next 39 years. In campaigning with Kevin in recent months, I was struck by the warmth and fondness that local people felt for their MP. In Yorkshire, of course, we do not have the displays of emotion that we saw on the streets of Brent, South, but I was gesticulated at on many occasions, as was my colleague in Sheffield, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg).

Kevin is a man proud of his Catholic faith and he has strong principles and values, which he never shied away from voicing. Members will be aware that Kevin served as Labour's principal spokesperson for Northern Ireland—a cause dear to his heart—between 1987 and 1994. He held many other roles, including Opposition spokesperson for defence and the civil service. In recent years, he has been a member of the Council of Europe and a key member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Kevin took a passionate interest in human rights, championing the rights of groups, including Travellers and the young soldiers who died at Deepcut, which society often wants to ignore or forget.

Kevin was always a strong advocate of animal welfare, and I am pleased that before he retired, fox hunting was finally legislated against. Kevin is quoted as describing his most important work as an MP as putting

"the final nail in the coffin of capital punishment by moving the amendment to include protocol 6 (which prohibits the death penalty) to the Human Rights Bill."

I am sure that the House will join me in wishing Kevin and his wife, Nora, a healthy and happy retirement.

I move on now to deal with Kingston upon Hull and its fascinating place in the political, constitutional and social history of this country. When people drive into Hull, they are greeted by a sign stating that Hull is a pioneering city: if we consider its history, we realise why. First, in 1642, Hull slammed the gate shut in the face of King Charles who was trying to access arms held in the city—an action that preserved the political liberties, rights and privileges of this House against the monarchy.

Secondly, Hull is the birthplace of William Wilberforce, who was born in 1759, later became an MP for the city and fought to abolish slavery. The cry of the abolitionists—"Am I not a man and a brother?"—still resonates today as we see slavery, people trafficking and especially women being trafficked for sex, still continuing around the world. In 2007, we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and Hull will lead the way in marking that event.

Thirdly, as Hull's first woman MP, I cannot miss the opportunity to celebrate the wonderful life of another Johnson from Hull who reached great heights. It is not my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), remarkable though he is, but Amy Johnson, a strong, independently minded woman who lived in Hull for many years and followed her dream to become an aviator. She was keen to succeed in a project that would demonstrate that women could be as competent as men in a male-dominated field. She qualified as the first British-trained woman ground engineer and, of course, made her historic flight as the first woman to fly alone to Australia in 1930. I shall certainly look to Amy Johnson as an inspiration.

I am lucky that my experience in local government and as a member of the London Assembly—together with other new hon. Members, I grappled with holding the Mayor of London to account—will stand me in good stead in the cut and thrust of politics at Westminster.

Today, Kingston upon Hull, North consists of leafy avenues in the south of the constituency, filled with students and academics from the university, up to the council estate at Bransholme, bordering the East Riding. Although it suffers from poor planning in the past and the economic blows of the 1980s, a strong community spirit survives in many of the people who moved from the fishing area in Hull to the new council estate in the 1970s. This area is now part of the pathfinder in Hull, which is very welcome. We have already seen community attempts at regeneration, with the award-winning community gym at the Dales working to get local people fitter. Work has also been done with disaffected young people to get them back on track.

Even after eight years of a Labour Government and massive investment in our community, we still have more work to do in health and education in Hull. Hull is leading the way, however, in the introduction of free healthy school meals, alongside the Labour Government's fresh fruit scheme, in all our primary schools. Those initiatives have been an amazing success. In one city centre school, there has been 98 per cent. take-up of healthy school meals. It is heartening to see small children either enjoying a healthy lunch of "cowboy pie", consisting of fresh meat and vegetables, or leaving school at the end of the day munching carrots and fruit. The long-term public health benefits of such innovations will take time to see, but I believe that they are essential if we are to reduce the gap between the life expectancy of a baby born in Kingston upon Hull today—six years less—and a baby boy born in Kingston upon Thames today.

Continuing with the theme of education, we also have a well established music service in Hull, which gives any child, including those with special educational needs, an opportunity to learn to play an instrument. That service survived the massive cuts to music education in the 1980s and has been fiercely protected in Hull. We need only to go along to a school concert at Thoresby or Fifth Avenue primary school to be impressed by the talents of the youngsters.

I know that in Hull we need to build on the excellent work of our primary schools in order to get the results in the secondary sector. I am delighted that the Labour Government have awarded £200 million under the "building schools for the future" initiative to refurbish and rebuild our secondary schools, including—and, hopefully, at the top of the list—the Sir Henry Cooper and Kelvin Hall schools.

The university of Hull sits in the heart of the constituency and I am particularly proud of the Hull and York medical school, which, opening only two years ago, was ranked second in *The Guardian* league tables of UK medical schools for 2005. The course attaches particular importance to good communication skills in medical training and clinical placements from early on in a student's life. We now have the opportunity to develop a dental school on similar lines and I will be supporting and lobbying the Government on that in the coming months.

I also want briefly to mention another innovation in Hull—the community warden service, which provides a reassuring presence on the streets of my constituency. It befriends and works with the elderly and the young.

[Ms Diana R. Johnson]

As a port city and a gateway to Europe, Hull has always had international links. It has just been awarded Fairtrade status to show the outward-looking nature of many Hull people. Meanwhile, our local football team, Hull City, the Tigers, has just won year-on-year promotion and will be playing in the championship. We have a marvellous new stadium, known as the KC stadium, built in partnership with the Labour council, which has aided our team's success.

I am humbled to have been elected to represent such an interesting and challenging area. I will promote the city whenever possible and never forget my duty to improve the lives of people throughout the constituency. I will strive to serve all my constituents to the best of my ability.

7.39 pm

Mr. Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to you for calling me to speak for the first time and I am grateful to hon. Members for the traditional courtesies, which I hope they are about to show me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, North (Ms Johnson) and other new Members on the worryingly eloquent examples that they have set me. In return, I shall try to observe tradition by being as uncontroversial as my liberalism allows.

Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would also like to thank the House authorities for the support and advice that they have give to new Members this year. I gather that the service is rather better than that of previous years and it is much appreciated. Of all the things that have been explained to us newcomers, the complex web of allowances, final-salary pension scheme and expenses is what attracts most attention outside the House. There are easy political points to be scored in attacking those provisions, but they do not seem particularly outrageous to me when compared with what is provided to some people in business. However—and I must declare a family interest in this, as my wife is a doctor—they place on Ministers a responsibility to treat very carefully the pension arrangements, in particular, of other public servants, including my constituents in GCHQ, the NHS and Cheltenham's schools and colleges.

It is appropriate that a Cheltenham maiden speech should be made on a day devoted to debating health and education, as our town motto is, after all, "Salubritas et Eruditio". The educational tradition is very long, and dates back to the foundation of our grammar school by Richard Pate in 1578. That tradition of educational excellence continues today, not least in our best comprehensive and special schools, the Gloucestershire college of arts and technology and our new university. I am also proud that the tradition includes first-class education for many disabled students at the national star college, parts of which are in my constituency. However, I am bound to say that the perception locally is that education provision is underfunded compared with other counties, and that pupils' experiences across Cheltenham can be very mixed. Those are serious issues, to which I am sure that I will return another day.

Health has been equally central to Cheltenham life. Today, we boast a three-star hospital foundation trust, a three-star primary care trust and a three-star partnership trust for mental health. While I share many colleagues' reservations about the accountability of foundation trusts, I hope that Ministers will look kindly on the mental health trust's current application for foundation status. Under the current system, that seems to be its best way forward.

Cheltenham's association with good health began in earnest in 1716, when our future prosperity was assured by a pigeon targeting a mineral spring. It was drinking the first Cheltenham waters. The spa soon became a magnet for visitors, including George III, his Prince Regent, Lord Byron, and Jane Austen, who took the waters for their health-giving properties. The spa water is, to be perfectly honest, an acquired taste that is unlikely to have mass market appeal in the near future, but I would recommend it to the Secretary of State's colleagues in the Department of Health for analysis, especially since water-borne bacteria phages have recently been suggested as possible antidotes to MRSA.

Cheltenham soon developed into the beautiful and friendly town that it remains today, but that brings its own problems. A high quality of life, relative prosperity and easy access to the beautiful Cotswold countryside attracts people to live and work in the area. As a result, we have been told by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to expect tens of thousands more homes to be built on our green belt, perhaps even merging us with nearby Gloucester. However, what is the logic of concentrating development on already prosperous towns that neither want nor need it, when smaller rural communities are dying for lack of families and less prosperous parts of the region and the country need and want development more?

In the end, our quality of life will be compromised and our traffic and services will be overloaded, while outlying estates will become even more of a focus for the antisocial behaviour that blights Cheltenham too, and which stretches police resources to the point where people are losing confidence in the force's ability to respond. Nor will that development of relatively expensive housing do anything to help the people trapped on our housing waiting list who are already beating a path to my surgery door.

There is inequality in Cheltenham. I have been elected not just by readers of *The Guardian* living in elegant regency properties—although I think that I probably did count on their votes—but by people who have to work hard just to make ends meet on streets and estates that suffer very significantly lower incomes, worse health and fewer educational opportunities than those in the more affluent parts of town. Those people expect me to fight for change in this House, and I promise to do so.

Cheltenham continues to welcome visitors, especially through a succession of festivals, many of them giving the town an international flavour. During the national hunt festival in March, the Queen's hotel flies the Irish tricolour, and our pubs take euros. In fact, the horses race in the constituency of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), but I would not embarrass him by suggesting that his pubs should take euros too.

Our international festival of music attracts world-class talent every year, as befits the birthplace of Gustav Holst. We also offer fantastic festivals of literature,

cricket, science, folk and jazz. Visitors to Cheltenham in recent years have also included a succession of Labour and Conservative general election candidates, who perhaps are ignorant of the fact that, for the past 30 years and for much of its earlier electoral history, Cheltenham has returned only MPs born and bred in Cheltenham. I am proud that I, too, am representing my home town in Parliament.

Cheltenham has had a great liberal tradition in this House and not just among those wearing my party colours. Our parliamentary representation was born in the Reform Act 1832 and our first MP, Craven Berkeley, was a staunch supporter of more democratic reform. However, I am afraid that he did not set a very good example in other ways, going so far as to shoot at an opposing Tory MP on one occasion, in a duel in 1842. Luckily, both were equally bad shots. On another occasion, Berkeley allegedly guarded the door of a Regent street bookseller while his brother beat up the proprietor. Nevertheless, he was very popular with his constituents and was re-elected many times, being unseated only once—for offering rather too many refreshments to his electors during the campaign. He thereby established a powerful Cheltenham tradition for electing local, liberal and independently minded MPs with a strong association with food and drink.

In the late 19th century, the best example of that tradition was James Agg-Gardiner, a successful Tory brewer. I went to school with the smell of hops from what was once his brewery wafting through my classroom. Agg-Gardiner, too, had liberal ideas. In particular, he championed the cause of women's suffrage as early as the 1870s. Then, as now, Cheltenham was a Liberal-Tory marginal. Agg-Gardiner lost the seat in the Liberal landslide of 1906, but only by 401 votes. The seat changed hands at each of the two subsequent elections, with increasingly tiny majorities, and was finally regained by Agg-Gardiner with a majority of just four votes—which makes 66 sound like a comfortable majority.

Another colourful and independent-minded Tory was Charles Irving, the first Cheltenham MP whom I knew as a constituent. Older hon. Members will remember him with affection for his skills in reforming and improving House of Commons catering. However, as with Agg-Gardiner, food and drink went side by side with more serious fare. Charles's maiden speech was a passionate attack on capital punishment, bravely delivered at the height of the IRA's bombing campaign. It reads as a timely defence against the curtailing of civil liberty in the face of terrorist atrocity. Charles was a genuine social reformer; that did not always endear him to his colleagues in the party to my right, but it made him well loved in every part of Cheltenham.

Charles's successor was my predecessor, Nigel Jones. In good Cheltenham tradition, he became chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group and was once named parliamentary beer drinker of the year. He, too, was a committed political reformer, championing, among other things, the trade union rights at GCHQ, which he did see restored while sitting in this House. At times, Nigel served Cheltenham as its MP under more difficult circumstances than any of us would ever want to face, and his courage and good humour in the face of injury and later ill health earned him much respect. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in congratulating him on his imminent ennoblement. I hope that the other House will prove a suitably restful environment, in which he will return to the best of health.

My election result was modest compared with Nigel's, but I was pleased to have raised not just important local issues but also critical global issues, such as the need to make poverty history and—the single most important issue of all—the fate of the planet's environment. However, local issues featured strongly in the election, and I cannot sit down without finally referring to one local issue that is relevant to the subject of today's debate. The previous Secretary of State for Health found himself in an embarrassing situation after he met me and local campaigners concerned at the loss of children's services from Cheltenham general hospital to Gloucester, and specifically at the loss of Battledown children's ward as a 24-hour in-patient facility, as proposed by the foundation trust. The petition handed to the right hon. Gentleman that day apparently ended up in a skip in Oxford, and that caused huge offence in Cheltenham. We did get an apology, but the best way for the Government to regain a little of their tarnished reputation locally would be for the Secretary of State to say that she will look afresh at the case of Battledown ward, and support a 24-hour in-patient service. As the Department said only last year,

"people have a right to expect . . . high-quality, locally accessible health care".

I am sure that the Government will want to prove that that was more than just words.

I am honoured to be here representing Cheltenham, and I am very grateful to the House for its patience.

7.48 pm

Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech to the House. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Horwood) on his excellent maiden speech, and I should also like to take this opportunity to thank hon. Members and the staff of the House for giving me so much help to settle into this role during the past few weeks. That help has been invaluable.

It is a great privilege to speak in this debate, as the House has never before been able to debate the legislative programme of a third-term Labour Government. This situation is not only historic, but provides us with further opportunities to improve this country for everyone.

At the outset, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Gerry Steinberg. Gerry served his constituents very well, and worked extremely hard to bring jobs and prosperity to Durham. He was for many years a diligent member of the Education Committee. I know that he will be missed, and the Public Accounts Committee, on which he also served, will be a less lively place without him. Right hon. and hon. Members might like to know that I have it as an aspiration to be as quiet and retiring as Gerry!

I also consider it to be an enormous privilege to be the Member of Parliament for my home, the wonderful city of Durham. Those of us who are fortunate to live there

[Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods]

know of its extraordinary beauty and outstanding cultural heritage. In an effort to introduce the rest of the world to it, the travel writer Bill Bryson wrote:

"Why, it's wonderful—a perfect little city . . . If you have never been to Durham, go there at once. Take my car. It's wonderful."

I extend the same invitation to all right hon. and hon. Members.

I wish to return to the subject of Durham's amazing heritage. Durham's history is founded on the life of St. Cuthbert, a seventh century Northumbrian saint. He was noted for his fair and placid manner, for having a remarkable talent for athletics and a reputed gift for working miracles—so not much for me to follow there then! Durham cathedral was of course built as his burial place. The magnificent cathedral is still a place of pilgrimage and worship: it is central to the life of the city and I pay tribute to the work of the cathedral today.

The cathedral is also remarkable for its Galilee chapel where the Venerable Bede is buried. Bede, a religious scholar and early academic historian, became known as one of the most learned men in Europe. As the final resting place of one of the earliest academics, it is perhaps fitting that the cathedral is now surrounded by Durham university. Our university is considered to be one of the best in the country. It is renowned internationally and it too provides essential jobs and a valued contribution to our civic life. I think it must be one of very few universities to have a beautiful castle as one of its colleges.

Durham has another heritage that needs to be equally celebrated, and that is a heritage built on the city's mining industry and Labour inheritance. It is a joy to many of us in Durham that the miners gala is not only still held in the city every year but goes from strength to strength. It acts as a real focus for progressive politics in the city and involves a wide range of voluntary and community organisations. Long may it continue.

In his maiden speech, Gerry Steinberg admirably chronicled the problems facing the ex-mining villages surrounding the city centre. He pointed to the devastating levels of unemployment created by mine closures and de-industrialisation, and the absence of any policies by the then Conservative government to tackle them. So unemployment became an intergenerational experience because of the lack of jobs. It also created acute deprivation and the associated problems of poor health and the waste of human talent. Thankfully, I am able to stand here some years later and talk about the positive changes Labour has made in Durham. Unemployment in Durham city has halved over the past eight years, and that downward trend is continuing as new jobs come on stream. While many of those jobs have been created as a result of Labour's investment in the public services, Durham's private sector is also thriving. For example, the rate at which new firms are starting up in Durham has increased by 30 per cent. since 1997. That compares well with the north-east as a whole, which saw new firm start-ups increase by 11 per cent. over the same period, and both Durham and the region outstrip the national rate of increase.

That economic success depends on having a well-educated and skilled work force. Progress with raising educational achievement has been one of the Labour Government's most impressive achievements. Durham city has seen a 20 per cent. increase in pupils achieving five good GCSEs. Durham's quality of life is also much better than eight years ago. The burglary rate, for example, is down by 36 per cent. People are also living longer under a Labour Government. Durham city's death rate from circulatory diseases has fallen by a quarter since 1997 and from cancer by a fifth.

One has only to look around my constituency to see how investment in public services is making a difference. In Durham, we have a new hospital, a new state-of-the-art further education college, and we are shortly to have new buildings for Durham Johnston school. We have a Sure Start scheme with a children's centre already being built, and more children's centres on the way. And Durham is, I think, typical in that regard.

My job as an MP will be to ensure that progress continues. That will mean working with a range of agencies, businesses and the local councils to continue the regeneration of the urban areas and former mining villages. It will involve bringing schools, colleges and the university together to continue to improve educational attainment in the city, to provide innovative training models for the workplace and to promote Durham as an international centre of excellence for science development. My background in higher education means that I am simply passionate about education and its capacity to transform whole communities as well as individuals, and I will work to improve education at all levels in Durham.

It will also be necessary to continue to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour and local policing teams should help to reduce the fear of crime especially for the elderly. I want to continue to engage actively with communities in the city and listen to and act on their concerns. That includes establishing a mechanism for the voices of young people to be heard so they can see that democracy works for them too.

Finally, I return to the theme of heritage that I started with. Durham also has a tradition of reaching out to troubled communities throughout the world. I am very pleased that the Government have put the middle east peace process and reducing poverty in Africa at the top of their international agenda and I look forward to working with the many groups in Durham that have overseas development issues as their focus. I will of course be there to represent all my constituents and I will bring hard work and commitment to that task.

7.57 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am especially pleased to follow the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods). Although I suspect that we will disagree on many issues in years to come, I agree with her about the beauty and scenic majesty of her constituency, as I pass through it on the train from Edinburgh to London.

I was also pleased to hear today the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace). I also had the pleasure of hearing him make his maiden speech in the Scottish Parliament in 1999. I was also pleased to hear the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Brent, South (Ms Butler), who gave us all considerable encouragement that if we are able to do our job well we will be routinely embraced by our constituents in the street. I aspired to the recognition

and affection that one of my predecessors, Sir Hector Monro, received from his former constituents. Some 22 years after he ceased to represent the Thornhill area of Dumfriesshire, people still come up to shake his hand.

It is my honour and privilege to have been elected as the first Member of Parliament for the newly created constituency of Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, to which I have often referred by the acronym DCT—although people then think that I am talking about some unfortunate medical condition. Some have suggested unkindly that my constituency was created just to bring together the bits that the boundary commission for Scotland had left over after it had created the 58 other constituencies. I prefer the boundary commission's own explanation that it wanted to bring together those diverse and disparate small towns and areas to create a constituency that would require its Member of Parliament to focus on rural issues. That is certainly the commitment I make to my constituents.

The constituency covers about 2,000 square miles and takes in the river valleys of the Annan, the Esk, the Clyde, the Tweed and the Nith. It contains about 100 communities. If I were to follow the example of other Members and list the merits and concerns of those communities I should take up all the time remaining for our debate this evening, so I can only summarise my remarks about a part of Scotland that has great scenic resonance and history. The one thing that I can say about William Wallace, Robert the Bruce and Robert Burns is that all those great Scots at least passed through my constituency.

The constituency begins at the English border at Gretna, now as famous in Scotland for its football club as for being a location to marry. The constituency stretches along the route of the M74 beyond Coalburn. To the west lie the communities of Thornhill, Kirkconnel, Sanquhar and Upper Nithsdale, which still has unemployment rates well beyond the national average. I am committed to working with our local MSP, local councillors and relevant organisations to increase employment opportunities in the area. I am also pleased to be playing a part in the A76 corridor action group, lobbying for improvements to Scotland's forgotten trunk road, which will play a vital part in the regeneration of the area.

In the east of the constituency lies the community of Langholm, which is steeped in rich border history and the history of the border reivers. Unfortunately, of late we have a new border reiver in the form of the Environment Agency, which has tried to introduce rod licences on the Scottish section of the River Esk—as unwelcome as any cross-border raids of the past. As a Member of the House, it is my intention to try to bring that matter to a resolution.

In the north and east, the constituency follows the A702, passing through communities such as Biggar and West Linton. Biggar has an interesting motto to which all of us from small towns can subscribe: "London's big but Biggar's Biggar". Many people living along the A702 believe that its designation as the main trunk route between the M74 and Edinburgh is unsustainable, and I hope to persuade the Scottish Executive that they must take action on that matter.

Biggar and the areas of south Lanarkshire that fall within my constituency have not had the benefit of Conservative representation since the election of 1959 when Patrick Maitland was defeated by Judith Hart. West Linton and Peebleshire have not had the benefit of Conservative representation for 40 years since the death of Colonel Donaldson. However, in accordance with convention, I shall pay tribute to more recent Members rather than those long past. In fact, because my constituency is newly created, three of the four predecessor Members are still Members of the House. Indeed, I have the pleasure of being the Conservative MP for the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr. Brown) and for Lanark and Hamilton, East (Mr. Hood). The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore) would have been a constituent but he moved a few weeks ago. I am sure that the two things are not related.

Like many Members on the Conservative Benches, I was greatly saddened that my friend Peter Duncan was not successful in his attempt to return to the House. As many Members representing constituencies in England will find, changes proposed by the boundary commission can be harsh to even the most hard-working Members. Peter's win in Galloway and Upper Nithsdale in 2001 was a remarkable achievement. If its boundaries had been retained, he would have been elected with a greatly increased majority, due in no small part to his diligence as a hard-working constituency Member, speaking out on issues that really mattered to the people in his far-flung constituency. Those issues included the lack of dental services—the registration of dentists being one of the health matters reserved to the House—the future of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and fuel duty.

Peter also made an enormous contribution to political debate, both in the House and in Scotland in his role as shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. He has much still to give to the Conservative party, Scotland and the House, and I very much welcome his continuing role as chairman of our party in Scotland, carrying out the structural and organisational reforms that our Unionist party needs to adopt to succeed in the future in Scotland and across the United Kingdom.

When asked which single issue is of particular importance to my constituency, I often reply that it is energy policy. At the northern end of the constituency are the largest opencast developments in Europe. At the southern end is the Chapelcross power station, which is being decommissioned. One of the roles that I hope to play in this Parliament is to persuade the Government to make a quick and positive decision on nuclear power so that Chapelcross can play host to a new nuclear power station, which would be most gratefully welcomed by the community and the local work force.

As I have said, I am the first serving Member of the Scottish Parliament to be elected to this place. The Scottish Parliament has had a difficult birth and continuing growing pains, and faces many challenges if it is to live up to the expectations of the people who voted for its establishment in 1997. However, we should never forget that it is the settled will of the people of Scotland that the Parliament should exist in its present form, and there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that they have changed their view on that matter. However, devolution is a process, not an event. The inevitable next

[David Mundell]

steps are to replace the system of nods and winks between the Labour party in Edinburgh and the Labour party in London with protocols and procedures between the Parliaments and Governments that will stand up to scrutiny and that will work when we have Governments of different political persuasions in Edinburgh and in London as we surely will.

It is with some sadness that I will be leaving the Scottish Parliament and the many friends and colleagues with whom I have worked there over the past six years. However, I look forward to the new challenges, which are already evident to me as the new Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale.

8.7 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on his able and interesting speech. I look forward to hearing his future contributions.

I applaud the Government's commitment to education and health, as shown in the Gracious Speech. Indeed, Liverpool has already benefited from the Government's investment. We have received additional spending of more than 50 per cent. on education and additional investment in health of more than 80 per cent. I hope that high level of investment will continue.

I want to draw attention to two concerns about education. The first is under-achievement. Liverpool is a city with growing success, yet despite that it contains some of the strongest concentrations of deprivation in the country. I should like the Government, with the local authority in Liverpool, to consider the areas of under-achievement that I consider to be of great concern. Take-up of higher education is still far too low. Take-up of skills training is also low and I look forward to the impact of the Government's new policies on that area, where more opportunities are required. Young people need to be attracted to the opportunities that are available. The Greater Merseyside learning and skills council is considering new proposals to try to capture the imagination of young people, too many of whom leave school with inadequate qualifications, and I hope that those efforts are successful.

I have a particular concern about the educational under-achievement of many black and ethnic minority pupils in Liverpool. I hope that Liverpool education authority will hold an inquiry into what is happening in relation to those minority groups in the city.

I have been very shocked to see figures that reveal falling attainment rates among some Somali and Yemeni children in Liverpool's schools. I am not clear whether any proper record is kept of how many children in those groups, and indeed others, are not being entered for examinations, so looking simply at percentage success rates in examinations is not an adequate reflection of what is happening in those schools. That issue has been ignored for far too long, and I should like to see renewed interest in it.

The second issue about which I should like to express concern relates to higher education and the appearance of insidious anti-Semitism in some of our universities. I ask the Government to intervene in accordance not only with their own race relations policy, but with their obligations under the Berlin statement of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which the Government took such a leading part in putting together and ratifying in December last year. One of the commitments in the Berlin declaration was that all the signatory states would do everything in their power to act against anti-Semitism.

I am extremely concerned about the harassment of Jewish students at the School of Oriental and African Studies, which is part of London university, about the failure of the National Union of Students to act and, indeed, about the apparent indifference of the university authorities. The harassment at SOAS has led the NUS anti-fascist and anti-racist convenor, Luciana Berger, to resign from the NUS executive, together with two of her colleagues. The regrettable—indeed, deplorable—incidents that led to that action include Luciana Berger being spat on. They also include university and student authorities taking no action whatsoever against the General Union of Palestinian Students stall displaying a leaflet advocating the protocols of the elders of Zion—the lie that Jews are in an international conspiracy to rule the world—and the Israeli embassy official, Roey Gilad, being banned from speaking at the students union until the head of the university informed the union that that decision was illegal. Despite that, disruption still followed.

If hon. Members read the evidence that was given to the recent inquiry set up by the Home Affairs Committee, they will see that there is growing concern about intimidation on the campus. The situation that I describe exists at SOAS, but there is concern that it could spread to other university campuses. I hope that the Government will accept that that is unacceptable and that it is something on which we should act.

My second concern relates to the current Association of University Teachers boycott of Haifa and Bar Ilan universities in Israel. That decision was taken on the eve of Passover, when relatively few Jewish academics were able to be present at the debate. It is indeed curious timing for Israel, of all the world's nations, to be singled out for such treatment, because it was only in May last year that Israeli and Palestinian academics signed a joint declaration on how they wish to improve co-operation by working together. The boycott is opposed by Sari Nuseiba, the president of al-Quds university in East Jerusalem, and it takes place against the background of an improving peace situation, with Israel preparing to evacuate from Gaza, as a first step to full negotiations to reach peace between those two peoples.

It is pretty clear that the boycott of Israeli universities that have been named at the moment, but I understand that a third is under consideration—is nothing to do with what is happening in those universities which is alleged to be so much worse than anything that is happening in any other university anywhere in the world. It is part of a long-running campaign to attempt to delegitimise the state of Israel.

Sue Blackwell, the mover of the motion, has said that Israel is an "illegitimate state". Indeed, she was forced to remove from her website links to neo-nazis, including links to Wendy Campbell, who wrote about so-called "unrivalled Jewish power", and to Marwen Media, which repeated the views of Kevin McDonald, who referred to Jews having "breeding programmes to

conquer other races". All that is deplorable. What happened at the AUT conference should be recognised for what it is—discriminatory and part of a long-running campaign to delegitimise the state of Israel at the very time when we see the hope, at long last, of bringing peace. I hope that the boycott will be overturned at the special meeting of the AUT council, which will take place this week.

Again, I ask Ministers to intervene and to show their concern for equal opportunity and their concern against racism. If there is a policy against racism, it should include a policy against anti-Semitism. I find it increasingly disturbing that policies that would be rightly condemned and abhorred if carried out against black people are somehow found to be rather different and perhaps acceptable when carried out against Jewish people. That is not acceptable, and I hope that the Government, with their strong record on race and as a major signatory to the Berlin declaration against anti-Semitism, will play their part in trying to resolve the issue.

The Government have an excellent record on education. We have seen major improvements nationally, and I and my constituents have seen dramatic improvements in the opportunities being given to people in the city of Liverpool. I call on the Government not only to continue their policies for investment, but to ensure that there is indeed equality of opportunity. That involves looking at under-achievement in our schools. I have referred to the situation of Somali, Yemeni and other black and ethnic minority children in Liverpool, but the problem relates to all those children in Liverpool who are not achieving their full potential. I ask the Government to continue with their determination to secure opportunity for all and with their programme of investment to give all people opportunities for the future.

8.17 pm

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Con): My grateful thanks to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the time to make my maiden speech today. I congratulate the many other hon. Members who have made their speeches, particularly the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), on raising such pertinent issues.

I should like to thank the people of Guildford for putting their trust in me and electing me to the House. I feel immensely privileged and honoured to have the opportunity to serve them. I look forward to the challenges ahead with considerable awareness of the responsibilities that I must now fulfil.

I should also like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Sue Doughty, who served Guildford for the past four years. She worked vigilantly for the constituency and went to considerable efforts to support all the wonderful charities that help local people so much. I am aware of her concerns about environmental issues and that she sought every opportunity to address them. Politics is, at times, a rather harsh business and there are never any second prizes. However, each of us has an opportunity to leave something behind, and Sue has done just that: she is held in considerable affection by many for her work both in the House and in the constituency.

Guildford town is located where the River Wey cuts into the north downs, and it has always been an important staging post between London and the coast. In fact, it remains so today, with many thousands of young people coming into Guildford on Friday and Saturday nights. Perhaps not so much has changed for the people of Guildford. Due to fears of violence and antisocial behaviour, that staging post has become a no-go area for many residents on weekend evenings.

The High street is full of history, and we are proud of both the guild hall, which was built in the 16th century, and Abbots hospital, which was founded in 1619 by George Abbot, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, to provide housing for the elderly poor. In fact, it still provides housing today and is testimony to the fact that the Government do not always have to provide everything themselves because other providers often do so better.

We have a little bit of everything in Guildford. Spectrum leisure centre is home to the national ice hockey league, and the cathedral on Stag hill is one of only four built since the Reformation. We have the vibrant and successful Surrey university with the research park that it owns and manages, which is regarded as one of the most successful in Europe.

Business is booming in Guildford, but it is an increasing challenge to embrace its success and deal with the consequences for our local environment, such as the imposed increases in house building, threats to our countryside and green belt, the ever-growing mountain of waste and planning rules that do not allow local people to stop the unending march of mobile phone mast technology. The farmers in our area still try to preserve the countryside, yet they are drowning in paperwork and bureaucracy. The pressures on Guildford are immense.

Going south from Guildford, my constituency stretches down to the Sussex border, with beautiful villages and countryside in which one can still find real pubs, proper village fairs and village greens. I am not quite sure how warm the beer is, but suffice to say that during the campaign, the village pubs brought colour to my skin, lightened my weary bones and were a welcome resting place for me and my footsore troops.

Guildford, and even the town itself, still has strong local communities and charities, so people have a strong sense of belonging there. Many of our charities pick up shortfalls in statutory services and the benefits that they provide are almost always entirely funded by local fundraising events. The saving to the state due to such charities is immeasurable. Charities that are concerned with health care include the Beacon centre, which offers help to people affected by cancer and other serious long-term illness and also treats people with lymphoedema, and Christopher's, which offers respite and support for families and children with life-limiting illnesses. Many mental health charities fill the gaps where state provision is woefully inadequate.

We also have Cranleigh village hospital, which was founded in 1859 as the first cottage hospital in the country. It is still open today only because of the stubborn efforts of the local community. Every time that closure raised its head, fundraising by the local community saved the day. In 1998, the people of Cranleigh decided that the only way to avoid the repeated threat of closure was to own the hospital, so Cranleigh village hospital trust was born. Seven years later, with land from a local benefactor and considerable

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local fundraising, they are ready to build their own new hospital. The people of Cranleigh have had enough of promises about the NHS. The village will ensure that it has the hospital that it wants and deserves.

Guildford has a generous community in which people willingly care for those less fortunate than themselves. Guildford might look like a prosperous and contented place, but we have our problems. Crime and antisocial behaviour keep people in their own homes, and worries about MRSA stop people attending accident and emergency departments. People stay in their cars and put up with traffic jams because of the woefully inadequate public transport. We have ever-soaring council tax and significant areas of deprivation, and Guildford, like many other places in the south-east, needs a fairer deal from the Government.

I trained as a nurse at Barts hospital in London, of which I am immensely proud, and worked in the NHS for 25 years. I have four children and should also declare that my husband is a doctor. That background gave me the opportunity to work with people from all walks of life and understand the issues that those ordinary people face day after day. The experiences of the people whom I have met over the years in my work, and more recently on their doorsteps, will never leave me. When I sit in these magnificent surroundings and am treated wonderfully by the staff here, my constituents and their individual stories will sit by me every day.

The gap between people and politicians has never been greater. People feel a long way away from where decisions are made and feel that they are not listened to by government at all levels. I look forward to the experiences ahead and the opportunity to contribute in this place to reinforce my belief that a difference can be made and that the Government can listen and change their mind through rigorous debate. Indeed, if people start to see argument and debate changing the course of events, perhaps more of them will start to feel that it is worth voting and that politicians are worth voting for.

I thank the House for listening to me and the people of Guildford for electing me. I will do everything in my power to bring politics closer to people, to ensure that the Government listen and to change the lives of those in Guildford for the better.

8.26 pm

Ms Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House for the first time on behalf of those whom I represent: the people of Islington, South and Finsbury. I compliment the hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) on her speech. We have quite a lot in common because we have both been watched from the Public Gallery this evening by an experienced Labour politician of some 50 years from Guildford—my mother.

I have the honour of following in the footsteps of one of the brightest men in the Cabinet of his day and a man of principle and pragmatism, the right hon. Chris Smith. He is recognised nationally as the man who delivered the right to roam and free admission to museums and galleries, and internationally Chris is probably best known as being the first openly gay Cabinet Minister in the world. Inspired by the testimony of Nelson Mandela, he decided to speak publicly about how he had been living with HIV since the 1980s.

To the gay community and many others, Chris is a hero, but to the people on the estates of Bunhill, the street properties of Milner square or on the Packington estate, none of that cuts a great deal of ice. What really cuts ice is that they had an MP who would always stand up for them and always had time to listen. In the past year I have knocked on 11,800 doors. Most people were out, but from those to whom I spoke I learned that Chris's constituency work had made a difference to about one in four of them. When I was out campaigning with him, I was moved by the number of people who rushed out of their homes to thank him and say goodbye. If, after 20 years, any of us from the new intake get that sort of reception when we stand down, we will know that we have done a really good job. Of course, we should not be thanking just Chris. We should also thank his partner, Dorian Jabri, who has been Chris's rock for nearly 20 years.

I also have the honour to represent a constituency that has made an enormous contribution to the labour and socialist movement. It was in Islington that Watt Tyler and the peasants' revolt stopped for the final time. The people of Islington successfully demonstrated for the return of the Tolpuddle martyrs, and we played our part in the Chartist movement.

I should also mention John Platt Mills, the late and much missed member of my last place of work, Tooks Court, who was elected to represent Finsbury in 1945. In those days, before the Lib Dem council decided to sell off that piece of our heritage for a few pieces of silver to the private sector, Finsbury town hall was the centre of passionate debate about the future direction of the Labour Government. The Labour party took the view that John wanted to take us somewhere that resembled the suburbs of Moscow, so they parted company fairly soon after. Islington also provided a refuge for Marx and Lenin and provided a home for Eric Blair, who wrote under the name of George Orwell. Of course, Islington provided the last home before Downing street for another Blair, who has become the longest serving Prime Minister the Labour party has ever had.

For me, though, the most remarkable thing about Islington is that everybody has a pretty clear idea of what it is like—even people who have never been there. This pseudo-familiarity probably comes, in part, from the fact that we seem to have the entire media living in the constituency. I even have the editor of *The Spectator* as a constituent. But while they report on the chatter in the cappuccino bars and on the leafy lanes, there is another side to Islington and Finsbury—a side that the media either does not know about or does not care about.

We are the eighth most deprived borough in Britain. Forty-one per cent. of the children in Islington live below the poverty line, and

> "my constituency lies only four miles from the House . . . yet it contains within it extremes of poverty and wealth in as stark a contrast as will be found anywhere in Britain."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 1983; Vol. 44, c. 404.]

That is a quote from Chris Smith's maiden speech some 22 years ago and it applies as much today as it did then.

Chris Smith also referred to the smouldering anger of ordinary working-class people, because when Chris was first elected in 1983 Mrs. Thatcher and her Government had abandoned us. The estates of Islington and the people in them had been left to rot. We do not forget that. The eighth poorest borough in Britain needs a Tory Government like we need a hole in the head. We know that only a Labour Government will look after the interests of a community divided, as mine is. Yet after eight years of a Labour Government, while nearly all of our estates have had money spent on them; while there is another £158 million about to be spent on them; while we have a new hospital, new health centres, two new schools, a new sixth form centre and more police officers; while we have four Sure Start centres and free nursery education for all our three and four-year-olds; while the unemployment rate has halved since 1997, and many people, especially women, have benefited from the minimum wage—while we have all benefited from this, it is still not enough. We remain, despite the famous wealthier bits of my constituency, an area that is poor, with ingrained deprivation that is transferred from generation to generation.

Just as people make assumptions about Islington, they are also in danger of making assumptions about Islington's new Labour MP, who is, after all, a resident of Barnsbury, a barrister and a woman. But it is actually my own early experiences that called me to work proudly with this Government on poverty. I was brought up by a single parent on a council estate. My mum struggled for years to bring up me and my brothers on benefits. I wear the chips that I have on my shoulder with pride. As the *Islington Gazette* rather pithily put it this week:

"You can take the girl out of the estate, but you can't take the estate out of the girl".

I am deeply proud to be following in Chris's footsteps and I am proud to represent Islington, South and Finsbury, which is a fabulous constituency. We have people from all over the world and from every background, all living on top of one another. Islington is a noisy and confident place. We have the best restaurants in London. We are home to the all-conquering Arsenal football team. Finsbury elected the first Asian MP more than 100 years ago. We elected the first openly gay MP. From the late 1920s until 1945, people could not get elected to represent Islington East, a corner of which is now in my constituency, unless they were women. The constituency had three women, one after another: Ethel Bentham, the 15th woman ever to be elected to Parliament; Leah Manning, the 23rd; then Thelma Kier, the 24th. The last was an even rarer creature—a Tory woman MP. However, I am the first woman to represent Islington, South and Finsbury and I sit on the Labour Benches, where we finally make up more than 25 per cent. of Labour Members. So we are halfway there, girls.

In the end, what I am most proud of is the fact that I am a Labour MP. We may not be perfect, but only my Government are serious about tackling poverty and lack of opportunity. I joined the Labour party to ensure that children like me did not only do well if we were lucky. I joined the Labour party to change the world. We are committed to ending child poverty, not just on the Market estate, or even just in Britain. We have an obligation to do all that we can to make poverty history internationally. It is not possible to end poverty overnight; it will be a hard slog. Islington's ingrained problems show that, but we are building a more cohesive society where everyone is valued and everyone has a place. That is very good news for the families on the estates who elected me.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak this evening. May I also say how very pleased I am to have been able to make my maiden speech in front of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, a long-standing friend of mine? I know that Muqtadir would be proud of her, and I hope that he will one day be proud of me, too.

8.35 pm

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC): It is a daunting prospect to speak after a number of good maiden speeches. I have to say that my mouth opened slightly when I heard the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Ms Thornberry) mention Marx and Lenin. That is a first for Labour Members, at least in my experience here. I am afraid that I misheard the hon. Lady and thought that she referred to Marx, Lennon and Blair, and my mind inevitably turned to Groucho, John and Lionel.

I want, with my new-found status as an old lag, to say something encouraging to the new Members who have spoken, which is that following those who previously represented one's constituency can be a daunting task. I am only the fourth Member for Caernarfon since 1890, following on from Dafydd Wigley, Goronwy Roberts and Lloyd George, who was the Member for 55 years. Climbing into those enormous shoes is not always easy, but hopefully one gets there eventually.

I want to take this opportunity to talk a little bit about health, and in particular mental health and the mental health Bill. I speak today for Plaid Cymru and the SNP, and I speak in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil)—I hope that I pronounced that correctly—who is unfortunately indisposed this evening. My background is in mental health, and there are few opportunities for Welsh Members to talk about health in this place because it is a devolved matter. I am probably the only social worker in the House approved under the Mental Health Act 1983 since the retirement of the former Member for Wakefield. I was also a member of the Joint Committee that examined the Government's draft Mental Health Bill over the winter, and I agree with the Committee's conclusions. As I said, health in Wales is a devolved matter, so it is problematic for Welsh MPs to address the issue. This, however, is an opportunity because the Bill deals with England and Wales.

There has been much criticism of the NHS in Wales—not, I should say, of the staff, but of the structures. Some of that criticism is justified, especially in respect of waiting lists. The NHS in Wales has followed a significantly different course, especially since devolution. There is not much use of the private sector and very little use of private finance initiative. There is an emphasis on public health outcomes, not just on delivering a sickness service, and health is seen as something that the NHS contributes to the pot, not something that it alone produces. There is an emphasis on localism, with the establishment by the Labour-

[Hywel Williams]

controlled Assembly of 22 local health boards. That has not been free of criticism, but it is a particularly Welsh model. Setting up those local health boards cost some £15 million, and apparently they cost another £15 million annually to run. That is the model that we have—one, some people would say, that we are stuck with, and it is different from the model in England.

There is also significant emphasis in Wales on joint working with local authorities, which again is somewhat different from England. That has a long history arising mainly from the all-Wales strategy for learning difficulties, or mental handicap, as it was then called. That is a joint project between local authorities, health authorities and, importantly, the voluntary sector. That difference between the systems in Wales and England has led to arguments that legislation such as the Mental Health Bill should be formulated for Wales either by having a specifically Welsh Bill or at least by tailoring the provisions of the England and Wales Bill to the particular circumstances in Wales. The Joint Committee looking at the draft Bill came to that conclusion. In fact, in a very startling recommendation, No. 105, we said:

"The standard of Mental Health Services in Wales must be at least as good as it is now in England before the provisions of the draft Bill can be implemented."

The Committee also said that

"Resources should be allocated in order to enable the service to be brought up to the English standard."

That services in Wales are not good enough to implement the legislation is a startling and damning conclusion. We are very far behind in many respects.

I hope to take the matter further if I am called to speak on Second Reading. I also hope to be a member of the Standing Committee on the Bill. I will not go into the detail now, but the significant features for us include the continuing dependence on large institutions; the severe lack of professional staff, which has strong implications for the expansion of tribunals; and the paucity of community resources if we are to provide for compulsory treatment in the community. For example, there is only one approved social worker on duty at night and at the weekends for the whole of Powys—an enormous area comprising almost a third of the land mass of Wales. Problems may arise because of the rural nature of Wales and the difficulty of accessing care—both in-patient care and out-patient care in the community, which may be made compulsory.

Specific and cogent criticisms of the Bill have come from all quarters in Wales, especially the Mental Health Alliance and the Wales mental health organisation Hafal. Again, I shall not go into detail, but I note that they have criticised the lack of a statement of principles in the Bill—the Scottish equivalent of the legislation has in it a statement of the Milan principles, which cover fundamental matters such as a patient's rights. Criticism has also been made of the fact that the power to compel treatment is not matched by a concomitant reciprocal right to treatment—treatment can be forced on someone, but there is no right to assessment or treatment—and the Bill's emphasis on compulsory treatment of the tiny minority of dangerous people, rather than on services for the overwhelming majority of people with mental problems, who pose no risk to anyone apart, perhaps, from themselves. Because of that focus, there is a danger of stigmatising anyone who receives mental health treatment. Finally, the great extension of compulsion to groups that are currently excluded, such as people with severe and dangerous personality disorders, has also been criticised.

Another obvious deficiency of the Bill is its failure to treat Wales as a multicultural and diverse community. For me, as a Welsh speaker, that is particularly marked in the lack of attention given to Welsh-medium services—the apparent assumption that Wales is monocultural and monoglot, with English being the norm. It is significant that the Joint Committee recommended that the language of provision in Wales should be a matter for the Welsh Assembly and that it could be dealt with through a code of practice. I hope to press that point on the Government. If we want to achieve equity of provision throughout England and Wales, we must be much more aware of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The Government have a fine opportunity to develop mental health law. Such a development is long overdue—the Mental Health Act 1983 was passed 22 years ago and needs reform. I hope that the Government will grasp that opportunity, but not by means of the Bill as drafted, given that the Joint Committee said that it was fundamentally flawed. There is too close a focus on the public misconception of people with mental health problems as dangerous, and insufficient emphasis on protecting people's rights and providing services for people in their own community.

8.44 pm

Ms Angela C Smith (Sheffield, Hillsborough) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech. I congratulate those who have today made their maiden speeches. In particular, I draw attention to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, North (Ms Johnson), who spoke about school meals. I am sure that it is an initiative that will have a positive impact on children's well-being and on their fitness to learn, and consequently on their educational attainments.

The House will no doubt be aware that there are now two Members named Angela Smith. It may be of some assistance to right hon. and hon. Members to remember that the other Member with my name is tall, blonde and possesses a southern accent. I am relatively shorter and darker, and possess the flat vowel sounds of a northerner. Unlike me, my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela E Smith) has been a Member of this place for some time, and long may she continue to be so.

Right hon. and hon. Members will also be aware that the previous Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough, Helen Jackson, was a hard-working representative who was respected everywhere she went. She is a hard act to follow. Helen was well suited to her constituency with her no-nonsense approach and her recognition that sometimes we have to fight long and hard to get what we want. No one got anything fancy with Helen. It was just hard work, commitment and a recognition that achievements never come cheap.

Helen could dig her heels in hard. She is passionate in what she believes; she is warm-hearted and caring. For instance, she led tributes to her agent, Alan Wray, when

he sadly passed away. She was quick to recognise in her tribute that her work was built on a collective effort by all those Labour members like Alan who worked for her and her constituency.

I have known Helen for more than 10 years, and I pay tribute to her work. She fought for equality for women and championed the interests of the developing world. She worked with Mo Mowlam to establish the Good Friday agreement for Northern Ireland. It is something of which I am extremely proud, as one of the greatest achievements of the Labour Government.

Helen also worked tirelessly in tackling the mass unemployment which Sheffield suffered in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the savage destruction of the city's economy under the previous Conservative Government. Helen was instrumental in establishing the earliest attempts at economic regeneration in Sheffield. That is now bearing fruit, with higher economic growth in the city than the national average, and above average reductions in unemployment. In Sheffield, Hillsborough, unemployment is now down by more than 70 per cent. since 1997. That is thanks to people such as Helen and thanks to the policies pursued by this Labour Government.

My final comment about Helen refers to her maiden speech back in 1992, when she talked about the plight of refugees from the brutal regime established by Pinochet in Chile. Sheffield extended a warm welcome and a helping hand to many of those refugees, and Helen played a key part in all of that. To this day there are Chileans in Sheffield who talk about how much Helen did to help them when they came to the city. That is what Sheffield is like. It is a city with a warm heart. The media, politicians and churches work together to ensure that the city remains welcoming. Only last week it was announced proudly by the local press that the city is to provide a safe haven for 51 refugees from detention camps in Burma. I am proud to represent a tolerant city in Parliament. There is nowhere quite like Sheffield and I am proud to call it my home. It sets an example which in my view should be followed by those who make an issue of asylum and immigration and exploit these matters in a cynical and unscrupulous manner.

I shall make a few comments about Sheffield, Hillsborough itself. It has within its boundaries 10 reservoirs, including the beautiful Broomhead reservoir. However, that is an indication of how wet the area is. It takes in a large part of the Peak district. A previous Member for the area, Alan McKay, joked in his maiden speech that there were more grouse than people in the area. I do not know about that, but I sometimes think that there are more bogs than people in this part of my constituency, as I have often realised to my wet and muddy expense.

Despite all this, a significant proportion of my constituents enjoy rambling in this beautiful part of the world. The Government's right-to-roam legislation has therefore been welcomed, again as one of their great achievements.

Alan McKay also talked at length in his maiden speech about a dispute between shop stewards and management at the Hepworth factory in the Loxley valley. I find that ironical because the factory is now closed, and I am delivering my maiden speech when the Hepworth site is at the centre of another controversy. Proposals are being developed to build a large number of new homes on the site—500—much to the dismay of the Loxley Protection Society and the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England. The site is in the green belt and I, for one, will support those who fight to protect that lovely valley from overdevelopment.

Loxley cannot be mentioned without referring to its other main claim to fame. Research has suggested that Robin Hood was born in the village of Loxley. Hon. Members will form their own view on the strength of this research, but I am confident of its validity and am pleased to claim Robin Hood for Yorkshire, which I am sure will be hotly disputed by hon. Members from Nottinghamshire constituencies.

On a more serious note, my constituency is home to manufacturers varying from Corus to Cadbury, from specialised steels for the aviation industry to liquorice allsorts. The constituency is also home to a large number of public service workers, and it is clear, therefore, that we have a wide range of needs in relation to education and training. One of my main priorities will be to ensure that people living in Hillsborough, young and old alike, are able to benefit from Sheffield's growing economy.

To that end I am pleased to support wholeheartedly the Government's investment and focus on developing a highly skilled work force. This investment has already produced a new further education facility for the people of my constituency, Hillsborough college, which will open later this year. I look forward to further developments in relation to 14-to-19 education and adult learning. Our people are our future, and I am excited by the challenge of ensuring that more of our young people engage in education post-16 and that more of our adult population engage in extending their education and their skills.

I come originally from Grimsby, and I am very proud of that fact. On my mother's side I come from several generations of steelworkers who were born and bred in the Don valley. I am therefore honoured to represent Sheffield, and particularly proud to represent Sheffield, Hillsborough in Parliament. Finally, I take this opportunity to congratulate Sheffield Wednesday on securing a place in the play-off final on Sunday. I wish our team all the best for victory in the match against Hartlepool.

8.52 pm

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am grateful to you for calling me this evening, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to have been elected to serve all the residents of the Kettering constituency. I must be one of the few speakers today who has a constituent in the audience. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope). I promised to represent all those in my constituency, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman can best represent himself and will want to do so on most issues.

I pay tribute to the tremendous maiden speeches of all new Members today, particularly the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith), whose contribution I particularly enjoyed.

I have the honour to be a local councillor in the Kettering constituency for Kettering borough council and I am delighted to be asked to contribute to the

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debate today on health and education, not least because I had the privilege of serving on the community health council in Kettering before the Labour Government abolished it. I then served on the health scrutiny partnership for Northamptonshire county council. I also have the privilege to be a school governor at two local schools, Avondale infants and Montsaye community college.

The Kettering constituency is situated in the very heart of England. Its people, its heritage, its strong community spirit and its enterprising approach to life make it an example of England at its very best. I am delighted to be able to represent the constituents of Kettering in the United Kingdom Parliament. Kettering touches the lives of many of us in ways that may be surprising. Anyone who had Weetabix, Alpen or Ready Brek this morning will have sampled the products of Britain's leading cereal manufacturer, Weetabix, which is based in Burton Latimer in the Kettering constituency. All the wheat that goes into those breakfast cereals comes from the rich farm land within 50 square miles of Weetabix's headquarters.

Anyone who reads a paperback book will be reading a publication that has been produced on book presses made by Timsons, which has almost a complete monopoly of book printing presses in Great Britain. Many hon. Members here today may be wearing shoes from Loake's, Cheney's or Padders, which are among the last remaining shoe manufacturers in Britain, and which have a proud heritage in Kettering.

Also located in the constituency is the battlefield site of Naseby where there was a major battle in the civil war in 1644, which is a lesson for us all because there the parliamentary forces overcame an overmighty Executive.

Not so long ago, the back of the £10 note had a scene on it from Charles Dickens' "The Pickwick Papers", of the cricket match between Dingley Dell and All Muggleton in 1836. It may interest you to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Dingley Dell is located in the Kettering constituency and Charles Dickens was a frequent visitor to my part of the world. Indeed, he followed closely a local election that took place in Kettering in 1835, and which is faithfully recorded in the marvellous history of Kettering by R. L. Greenall, who says:

"rough housing the Tories became part of nearly every contested election. On occasions, election day was more than boisterous. The most violent was a by election in 1835, reported by a horrified Charles Dickens in the Morning Chronicle. When Tory supporters rode into Kettering they were so intent on taking over proceedings that one of them produced a loaded pistol and might well have committed murder had he not been restrained by his friends."

I am pleased to report that this last election was a far more civilised and fair-minded fight than that in 1835.

Perhaps at this point I should pay tribute to my eminent predecessor, Phil Sawford, who remains a constituent in his home town of Desborough. I said at the time of the count how grateful all of us who live in Kettering are to him for the tremendous service that he gave this House and his constituents during a distinguished eight-year period in office, and all of us, I know, will wish him well in his retirement from this place. I would also like to pay tribute to the Member of Parliament for Kettering before Phil Sawford—the right hon. Roger Freeman, now Lord Freeman of Dingley, who serves in the other place. He too was greatly admired by his constituents, who were grateful for his role as the Member of Parliament.

I should like to take this opportunity in the debate on the Queen's Speech to thank all the public service workers in the Kettering constituency for the marvellous work that they do for and on behalf of local residents. But I am afraid to say that despite record investment in local public services all is not well with local health and education services and policing. There is grave concern about waiting times at Kettering general hospital. There is also concern about the cleanliness of both Kettering and Northampton general hospitals. There is great concern too about the lack of NHS dentists in and around Kettering. During the campaign, one resident said that he had found an NHS dentist but that it was in Bedford. That was the closest NHS dentist that he could find.

Some of our schools are close to bursting point, others cannot find enough teachers, and there is great concern about how local schools will fund the 10 per cent. non-contact time being dictated by the Department for Education and Skills. Advice from the Secretary of State on how local schools can meet the funding gap would be most welcome. There is also huge concern among aspirant students who want to go on to university that they are about to be burdened with thousands of pounds of new debt.

I could not leave this debate, however, without mentioning policing and the local concern about antisocial behaviour and crime. The chief constable of Northamptonshire has said that he needs at least 200 more officers to police Northamptonshire to the standards required, yet the Government consistently refuse to provide him with the resources that he needs.

Perhaps one of the most worrying aspects over the next four to five years will be the growth proposals for the Kettering area made by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Local people welcome new housing, but they do not welcome the scale and extent of the housing plans put forward by the Government. Our local public services are already overstretched, and local people have come to the conclusion that that situation will not improve if tens of thousands more houses are built in and around the Kettering constituency over the next 20 years. Already, crucial infrastructure projects are being delayed. Very quietly, just before the election, improvements to the A14 were postponed by five years, from 2012–16 to 2017–21, and there are now no plans to upgrade the A43 Kettering to Northampton road until at least 2021.

I see it as my role as the local Member of Parliament to stand up for residents in the Kettering constituency, whatever their political colour and whether they voted or not. I will do my very best to ensure that I am a good constituency Member of Parliament, and I am proud to represent a constituency that, in my view, represents England at its very best.

9.1 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone) on an admirable maiden speech.

Listening to it, I was nostalgic, as I am a native of the Kettering area, and I was remembering with some alarm that it is exactly 40 years ago that I was the chairman, while I was at school, of the Kettering young socialists, and exactly 50 years ago that I was the mascot of the Desborough Town football club, after which life has been something of an anti-climax. I congratulate him and all the other hon. Members who have made maiden speeches today. When I came to the House, we did not have time limits, and we could luxuriate in paying tributes for maiden speeches. Now we have to be rather brisk, but that makes what we say no less genuine and heartfelt. We have heard some extraordinarily impressive maiden speeches today, which bodes well for the Members concerned and for this House.

Listening to the exchanges at the beginning of the debate, I felt that we were still in the middle of the election campaign, certainly in relation to the health service. The health issue that dominated my election campaign concerned one six-year-old girl called Olivia Clarke. At the beginning of this year, Olivia was at school at Moorhill primary school, and she contracted meningitis. There were complications. Blood poisoning set in, and it was said that she had to have her feet amputated, and her hands amputated. This was done. When she was in hospital—this coincided with the beginning of the election campaign—it was announced that she had also contracted MRSA.

I cannot pay tribute enough to Olivia's parents. They were absolutely unstinting in their praise for the devotion of the health service staff concerned with her care. They refused absolutely to join in any cheap politicking around an issue that was too important for that. I got very upset during the election at the people who wanted when they saw a problem to exploit rather than solve it. Olivia's parents wanted MRSA sorted, but they also knew that they depended on the national health service for their daughter's life and future, and they were not going to bring the matter down to any kind of game that politicians played.

I am delighted to say that Olivia has just returned home from hospital. She is doing very well, and it looks as though the MRSA bug has been conquered. What has happened is a reminder to me that we should not play games with such issues. The Conservative party does not like targets. I am very pleased that the Government have a target for reducing the rate of MRSA infection in our hospitals. We should have targets because they galvanise effort. I am glad that we are implementing an inspection system to make sure that targets on MRSA are reached.

In these few minutes, I want primarily to discuss a word, "respect", which surfaces in the Queen's Speech and about which I have been worrying a good deal during the past few days. What worries me most is the way in which it has been discussed. Worthy people have been wheeled out to tell me what it means, and, in one way or another, head teachers, bishops and social workers have all sought to tell me that it is something that must be earned. If we believe that, we have not begun to understand what we are talking about.

Respect is simply about treating other people as one wants to be treated oneself. People do not have to earn that right; it is their right as fellow human beings. My neighbour does not have to earn the right to be treated as a decent neighbour; it is his right as a neighbour, and the same is true of people who use the road or who attend schools. We have lost sight of what we mean when we discuss such things.

The Government are right to talk about respect, because everyone in society is talking about it. Society cannot function unless people have basic respect for each other. We know—at least we think that we know—that the causes associated with the loss of respect go far beyond anything that we might say in this House or measures that might be contained in the Queen's Speech. The Government's job is to pass legislation, and this House's job is to process that legislation. We should not pretend that we have reached the heart of such issues.

We know that the matter probably has something to do with what has happened to parenting in recent years. The figures are frightening: in the past 25 years—a generation—the number of children who are living with their two natural parents at the age of 16 has dropped by a quarter, which is a phenomenal change in the structure of our life. In some minority communities—for example, the Afro-Caribbean community—the absence of fathers is simply frightening. When some other hon. Members and I were children, the cry would sometimes go up, "Wait until your father comes home." For many children in this country, there is no father to come home.

We know that the matter has something to do with behaviour and the fabric of social relations in our society. In addition, we suspect that the portrayal of the matter in the media has something to do with the situation. Years ago, we did not worry about the media, because people had the buffer of community, family and neighbourhood. That barrier no longer exists for many people in our society, and the images of behaviour that people see are images of the life that it is said that they should properly lead.

To return to the subject of the debate, our health service staff in accident and emergency departments are terrified on Friday and Saturday nights. Why do they inhabit a sea of violence and vomit, which was never previously the case? Why must we put up signs in all our public service institutions to say that it is an offence to behave in certain ways against the staff who work there? Why, as Ofsted tells us, does behaviour in one in 10 schools make learning extremely difficult? We know that something has happened out there to cause the problems that we discuss in here.

There was a nice exchange in Question Time today about the two political satires, "Yes, Minister" and "The Thick of It" but let us consider the difference: one is witty and civilised and the other is witty and coarse. In a generation, we have witnessed the coarsening of society. We are then told, "You have to reflect that because that's how we are."

Government can do only so much. We cannot fix the matter in the way in which we might fix other things but if we do not attend to it, people will begin to walk away from civic life. If a state ultimately cannot guarantee order, it cannot even ask to be treated as a state. That will lead to an erosion of civic life of which we have so far caught only a glimpse.

9.11 pm

Lynne Featherstone (Hornsey and Wood Green) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I follow the hon. Member

[Lynne Featherstone]

for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), who will understand if I do not debate the excellent points that he made in his speech. I congratulate all hon. Members and hon. Friends who have made their maiden speeches.

My predecessor and I had our political differences but I would like to pay tribute to Barbara Roche. It was clear on the doorstep during the election campaign that she was held in high regard as a good constituency Member of Parliament. She had a meteoric rise in politics as a member of the Whips Office, Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and Minister of State in the Home Office until the general election in 2001. However, I should like to pay particular tribute to her strong and warm support in 2002 for civil partnerships for same-sex couples. She rightly earned an excellent reputation among that community for her work.

What can I say about Hornsey and Wood Green? I moved to the constituency when I was five—demonstrating prescience unusual in one so young in understanding that, some decades later, being a local girl would stand me in good stead for getting selected for the seat. It was clearly a hotbed of Liberal Democrat success, cunningly masquerading for 13 years as a Labour seat and for the previous 26 years as a Conservative seat, then served by the much-loved constituency Member of Parliament, Sir Hugh Rossi.

I went to Highgate primary school and Muswell Hill youth club. I played kiss-chase in Highgate woods and, occasionally, depending on the boy, I let myself be caught. I took part in the early days of the Mountview theatre school and I was married at Haringey civic centre—divorced by post.

The constituency is a vibrant centre for the arts, and the Mountview theatre lies in the cultural quarter of Wood Green, which is a lively, bustling and busy town centre. It is also home to the Chocolate Factory, which has nothing to do with chocolate but is an enterprise that houses a colony of visual and performing arts, individuals and small companies.

In the Crouch End area, the council is in the process of handing over Hornsey town hall to a community trust to become a new community arts, entertainment and education facility. I will work to further that aim and, in doing so, seek the help of the Deputy Prime Minister in exempting the council from best value. I am sure that he will help and understand that it is an exception that proves the rule.

Hornsey and Wood Green is full of history. The Alexandra Palace, birthplace of television, dominates the west of the constituency around the Muswell Hill area. I hope that the Government's ambition for super-casinos will pass the Ally Pally safely by, and that it will be an asset for the people with its future decided by the people.

I want to mention my constituency in the context of today's Queen's Speech debate on health and education. Because of the wonderful family housing stock and leafy streets, parts of Hornsey and Wood Green understandably attract young couples starting families. But their influx and apparent fertility—five years on from the "big bang", if you will excuse the expression, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the millennium—has resulted this year in 140 sets of parents not getting their first, second or third choice of school. I know that the Prime Minister cares passionately about education and choice, and I look forward to being able to tell those parents that the Government have learned and are listening, and that local parents will not face such a shortfall again.

On health, I turn to a constituency issue that is doubtless replicated throughout the whole country. Hornsey and Wood Green is the target of monthly, if not weekly, applications by mobile phone companies. A protest group of parents or residents springs up around every application that is made. They are occasionally successful but only for a moment—until the applicant reapplies. We all use a mobile phone, and we may yet pay a hefty health price for doing so; it gets very hot if one holds it for too long, and I am deeply suspicious. But while the health risks remain undetermined, I am hopeful that all Members, regardless of party, will welcome the powers being given to local authorities to enable them to refuse such applications under the precautionary principle, in order to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

Hornsey and Wood Green is a complex constituency. It is home to the very rich and the very poor alike, geographically encompassing wonderful open spaces and leafy streets, cheek by jowl with deprivation that is off the Richter scale—where concrete rules, unbroken by any kind landscaping. Our campaign headquarters was above a pub: the Three Compasses, in Hornsey high street. I attribute at least 1 per cent. of my 14.6 per cent. swing to the popularity of our headquarters with London activists, who came to help—again and again. One of them gave me a "congratulations" card that showed the pub standing in splendid isolation in fields a century ago. I was reminded that the march of time will inevitably paint and fill our landscape, but we must not be powerless to guide that march.

The urban architecture in my constituency ranges from world-class design to developer nightmares that pepper and blight residents' lives for decades. More often than not—although not exclusively so—it is the poorer areas that end up with the worst-designed or poorest-quality buildings, when in fact, we need the best there to raise people's eyes above the awful and to give inspiration and expectation in life. Mayor Livingstone's London plan—I recently spent five years in the company of Mayor Livingstone, so I know that plan well—is intended to deliver desperately needed housing in Hornsey and Wood Green. But the plan is being taken in vain, as carte blanche for cramming and for the lowest common denominator of design, without providing the proper infrastructure for education, health and transport.

Lastly, I turn, metaphorically speaking, to crime and antisocial behaviour. In parts of my constituency, gun and knife crime not only blight but end lives. Although the local police force has had much success in reducing crime in general, this deadly malaise appears intractable. Some young people seemingly have no way out of, nor even a desire to be out of, an environ of crime where aspirations are virtually non-existent.

A woman telephoned me during the election campaign to explain that her son and grandsons were facing possible life sentences for violent crime. She said that she had done everything she could as a mother to

bring them up right—she was crying on the phone—but they did not care: they wanted only to be admired by their peers and sadly, that admiration was based on criminality. She asked whether I could please help. That is a charter of despair that must be addressed.

Hornsey and Wood Green, like other constituencies mentioned today, has its share of antisocial behaviour. But it is not how young people look or dress that should concern us; rather, our concern should be how they behave, and when that behaviour is abusive or criminal, it needs to be dealt with, not just moved on. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) talked of volunteering as a possible route. We should look at that, but we also need revitalised youth services and facilities, because without them hanging around is often all that there is.

While there are many issues and challenges that need addressing in Hornsey and Wood Green, it is the most wonderful place. Why? Because of its people. In the end, it is always people that count. The ethnic mix of the constituency is exciting: there are hundreds of languages and many different communities that live, work and play in our fantastic melting pot. The challenges that that brings are huge and I look forward to working with all residents to help them achieve their aspirations. This rich tapestry, where all human life percolates, is Hornsey and Wood Green. I love this area and I am honoured to serve its residents. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

9.20 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), who spoke with great clarity, great confidence, generosity and poise. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group, I commend her on her choice of election campaign headquarters—above a pub. I hope that, in honour of her headquarters, she will join our group and maintain its status as the largest all-party parliamentary group.

I am happy to be here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, having defended Labour's 15th most marginal seat. I noted the exit polls and departed for the count. It tends to be a slow count in Selby, so I arrived at 3 am without any great expectations. When I was declared victor at 7.10 am, I had to borrow a bottle of champagne from my opponent for the obligatory local newspaper photos.

We have heard a lot today about hugging in the streets in London, but that certainly does not happen in Selby, where people take these things in their stride. I just had time for a bacon sandwich and went into my office. My first call went something like this: "Did you win, then?"; "Yes, actually, I did"; "Well, what about my housing benefit?". That brings one down to earth, but it is with great pride that I am in my place on these Benches for the third time, supporting a third-term Labour Government.

I sometimes look back on some of the people who inspired me to get involved in Labour parties, and, in the 1970s and '80s, they included my late father. At that time, it would have been difficult to believe that a third-term Labour Government could be in place now with ambitions to end child poverty; ambitions to lead the world in debates on development, trade, the environment and climate change; ambitions to replace primary and secondary schools with new builds over the next decade; ambitions to provide 15 hours of free nursery care for all three and four-year-olds and then to increase it to 20 hours; and ambitions to bring waiting times down to 18 weeks from GP referrals. It is truly a great programme to support.

Ministers remind us of the importance of the manifesto. Speaking as a top-up fee rebel in the last Parliament, I certainly think that the manifesto is an extremely important document. I have read it three or four times and Ministers will be pleased to know that I see plenty of scope for debate about some of the detail. I would like to touch on a couple of aspects of the detail on education and health.

First, I want to deal with the proposed partial smoking ban. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group, I believe that the hospitality industry should now press for a total ban. I agree to some extent with the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—that we should have either a voluntary system or a total ban. I fear that the market could be become distorted by the scheme that the Government are proposing at the moment. There is a danger of encouraging drinking dens in the old style. I believe that it is sensible to encourage pubs to serve food. Yesterday, the British Beer and Pub Association produced a code of practice.

If our concern is for the staff, we should really be pressing for a total ban. Some amendments may well be proposed to test opinion on that issue. If I were speaking for the industry, I would stress that clarity and certainty are required above all. From the pub company's point of view, it would be better to argue for a transitional period towards a total ban and perhaps additional rate relief for pubs on the margin rather than go down the present rather uncertain route.

As to hospitals and choice, my constituency exemplifies the rich diversity of NHS provision. We are looking forward to three new hospitals. The first is a new cottage hospital on the Selby war memorial site. The second is a fast-track treatment centre, involving the private sector, on the former Clifton hospital site in York. The third is a new acute hospital, or series of hospitals, in mid-Yorkshire at Pinderfields and Pontefract. I support the agenda of choice in the NHS. It will be marvellous when people in Selby can choose and book through their GPs—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Conversations are breaking out among hon. Members, and I am having some difficulty hearing the hon. Gentleman addressing the House. Perhaps the House will do him the courtesy of listening.

Mr. Grogan: There is merit in the new choose-and-book system, but I am not so sure about the targets being set, such as the one for 15 per cent. private-sector provision. The York hospital trust is interpreting that in an interesting way. The treatment centre at the York hospital site is being built in partnership with Capio, and will be staffed entirely by doctors on secondment from the NHS. In phase two of the development, the trust wants to build, with the help of a private sector provider, as many as four wards for elective surgery on the York hospital site, but again it wants to second doctors from the NHS rather than bring them in from developing

[Mr. Grogan]

nations. The private sector providers think that that will provide greater continuity, and it will be interesting to see how Ministers react to the proposals.

In the run-up to the next general election, if we do not manage choice properly, there will be the danger that some hospitals will be under severe pressure. In mid-Yorkshire, for example, the plans for a private finance initiative new build at Pontefract and Pinderfields are delicately balanced. They could be unbalanced if the private sector has to provide 15 per cent.

I also support the new dental school proposed for York, but I want to move on to education in the minutes that remain to me. When, at 7.10 in the morning, I made a rather bleary-eyed acceptance speech in response to my unexpected election victory, I stressed that, in this Government's third term, I wanted the schools in the poorest areas of Selby to achieve as much as those in the more affluent areas. The signs are already very good.

For example, in a school in the Fairburn with Brotherton ward of my constituency, only 52 per cent. of 11-year-olds achieved level 4 or above in English and maths in 1997. The total is now 82 per cent. That is above the national average, and it stems from the tremendous leadership shown by the head, John Evans. The success is also down to extra resources—the school is a new building—and it shows what can be achieved. Other programmes, such as Sure Start, have proved tremendously successful.

I am more or less an observer of the city academy debate, as we are not going to get one in Selby. I have heard hon. Members supporting the establishment of city academies in other locations, where they have been agreed with local authorities and local residents, and I am sure that, in those circumstances, they are a good thing. However, the Labour manifesto makes no mention of removing the power of local authorities or communities to say no to such academies, if that is what they choose to do.

I am pleased that the Queen's Speech contains no proposals to remove the power of local authorities to resist city academies. Perhaps that is a victory for the Secretary of State over Lord Adonis. New schools and new investment must be welcomed, but do we really need to follow the Government's model, under which all power is given to a person who may donate only £2 million out of the £30 million needed to build a school? One person who successfully resisted a city academy in Waltham Forest said:

"We haven't got anything against this man"—

in this case, Jasper Conran—

"as an individual, but why should all this public money and power be handed over to people just because they happen to be very rich?"

The principle involved is not especially modernising, and does not offer much in the way of accountability. Ministers should proceed very cautiously when it comes to city academies: they should abide by the spirit of the manifesto, but not go beyond it. That is the big challenge for the two Secretaries of State on the Front Bench today. They must get right the balance between the public sector ethos and the proper use of market forces in both education and health. If they can do that, they will be heroines of the Labour movement.

We have been promised that, at some stage in this Parliament, there will be an orderly transition between Prime Ministers. It will be a test of Cabinet Government to ensure that there is a smooth transition of policies on health and education when that change takes place. I am sure that both Secretaries of State are well up to the task. I want our Chancellor and Prime Minister to be as close, in the next two or three years, as they were when they ate ice creams together during the general election campaign.

9.29 pm

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan). Obviously, in many ways, I would rather he were not here, but he always speaks with great courage and independence. I noted what he said about opposing top-up fees and tuition fees, and he will be pleased to know that the Welsh Assembly today voted against top-up fees. He is not alone and—one never knows—the Opposition might give him another chance to vote on the issue before this Parliament is out.

We have had an excellent debate and I am delighted to respond to it on behalf of the Opposition. We have heard a remarkable set of maiden speeches from people who are genuinely passionate about the areas that they represent including, most recently, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), who gave a very good speech.

I agree with the Prime Minister about one thing—there is no more important issue for our country than education. It is not just that we desperately need to raise standards and release the potential of our young people. Education lies at the heart of the challenges we face—the skills problem, the crime problem, the drugs problem and the frustration of unfulfilling lives problem. At the root of all those problems, much of the solution lies in education.

I say to the Secretary of State that huge common ground exists on this issue between the parties. Everybody knows that we must move away from the idea that one size fits all in state education. The hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), in a great maiden speech, spoke in favour of academies and she was right. Everyone knows that we have to give schools freedom to make more decisions about their culture and their spending. Everybody knows that we have to break down the Berlin wall between state education and independent education. We all know that we must end the snobbery about vocational education, and that means investing in it, so that young people do not switch off from learning at 14 and 15. We all know that choice and involvement of parents should be encouraged.

Mrs. Ellman: I note the hon. Gentleman's wish to provide opportunity. Can he therefore clarify his party's position on education maintenance allowances?

Mr. Cameron: As the hon. Lady will obviously know, we have just lost an election and we have to look at all the policies that we had. We think that what we put forward at the election had great merit and that the principles were right, but we are beginning a policy review, which is the right thing to do after an election—*[Interruption.]* I am glad to have given such delight to Ministers.

The issues are too important to try to find differences where none exist. The issue is people's futures. These are our children, not some guinea pigs to be subjected to endless experiments in public policy. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mr. Hunt) made a remarkable maiden speech on that point. In many ways, we have had a friendly debate, but perhaps the most friendly moment was when he said that he was not as fragrant and beautiful as Virginia Bottomley, and the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith) shouted, from a sedentary position, "Well, you're not so bad yourself." *[Interruption.]* I am afraid that it is on the record now and the Minister cannot deny it.

While there is an emerging consensus in some areas, there is a pressing need for tough choices in other areas. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) spoke about his experiences in Northern Ireland and I am sure that there is much that we can learn from the educational success there. Literacy is an example. If children cannot read properly, they cannot learn properly. If they cannot learn properly, they misbehave and wreck the education of others. So discipline is tied to literacy, but we still pussyfoot around the need to apply the best method of teaching, which is phonics. We should get on with it.

The curriculum is another example. It is right that we have one, but it has become stuffed full of unnecessary and occasionally damaging prescription. It badly needs slimming down. Streaming is another issue. To me, it is common sense. We need to stretch our brightest children and we need to help those who are falling behind. How can we do that with an outdated and unquestioning adherence to mixed-ability classes? Those are big challenges ahead for those of us who are committed heart and soul to giving every child the start in life that they deserve. They are challenges that I am prepared to confront.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on retaining her position. Despite the rumours, she did not get the sack. Instead, she has been given what we have to call a new "colleague". I am told that many women dream of the day when their Adonis will arrive. I am not sure that the Secretary of State is one of them. From what I have read about Lord Adonis, we should wholeheartedly welcome his appointment. He supports parental choice; so do we. He supports school freedom; so do we. He sounds admirable, and as he started life in the Social Democratic party he can presumably rely on support from all parts of the House. As someone in the other place said, he started in the SDP, now he is in the Labour party and he is introducing Tory policy. Truly, he is a man for all seasons.

It is a pity—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) will listen to this bit. It is a pity that the Prime Minister could not find one of his 355 Labour MPs in the House of Commons to do the job but presumably he was hard pressed to find anyone who actually agreed with him. Anyway, we are in the unique position of having two Secretaries of State for Education: one in the Commons, who was elected, and the other in Lords, who was anointed.

I shall try to help the right hon. Lady, however. If she ever has any problems with Lord Adonis she should remind him of an article he wrote in 1996 about the House of Lords. I think she will enjoy this: Mr. Adonis, as he then was, wrote that the other place is

"a valuable source of social security for retired politicians".

He went on to say that—I think she will like this bit too—apart from the Lord Chancellor

"no Ministers of importance sit in the Lords".

I am sure that the right hon. Lady will agree.

We agree with the words in the Gracious Speech—school discipline, parental choice, freedom for schools—and if real tangible actions follow those words, we will back them. But if we have a stream of initiatives that are not followed through, or gimmicks, we will oppose them. The same applies in health. If hospitals are given real freedom, and power is devolved to professionals, we will back the Government. If it is all talk, we will not.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) warned the Government on that front. She said that they should take time with their legislation. She is right. The Opposition believe that choice has a role to play in meeting rising expectations on health.

The right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (John Denham) made a thoughtful speech about private sector involvement. He was sceptical about it. It is clear that the Government will have a tougher time on that issue. Who knows? They may need support from the Conservative Benches. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Huddersfield says that there is nothing about policy, so I shall turn to policy and to his speech.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about school discipline. I agree with him; he has great experience and I look forward to reading the reports of his Select Committee. Discipline in schools, ordered classrooms where teachers can teach and children can learn are vital principles. We backed them with policy at the last election and we shall continue to do so. The Government spoke about those things before the last two elections, but let us look at what happened.

There were policies, such as targets for cutting exclusions, that actually made the problem of discipline worse. That is why we have a situation where a teacher is attacked every seven minutes of the school day and truancy is up by a third. If the Government want to get serious about school discipline, they should give heads full power to exclude unruly pupils; they should abolish appeals panels; they should allow schools to make home-school contracts enforceable and they should invest in turnaround schools. Is that enough policy for the hon. Member for Huddersfield? If the Government do those things we shall back them.

I have to say to Labour Members that the start was not good. The first act of the Secretary of State was to set up a new high-level group and then to rush on to the "Today" programme to tell us all about it. What happened? She was asked about the number of schools with serious discipline problems and she started talking about 5 per cent. of schools. According to the chief inspector, the number is one in 10—10 per cent. of schools. When asked about the number of appeals that

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are overturned, the right hon. Lady said that it was 2 per cent. In fact, it is 20 per cent., and when John Humphrys put that point to her, she said that it was a misprint in *Hansard*. I hope that she has been upstairs to give *Hansard* a full apology.

When the Secretary of State was asked about changes in the guidance to schools about exclusions, she said that there had been none. In fact, the rules were changed in 1998 and new guidance was introduced in 1999. It was amended in 2000 and again in 2001. It was reissued in 2002 and changed again in 2004. I suppose that for a Government who are obsessed with meddling that probably does not count as intervening very much but the rest of us would take a different view.

I want to turn to the speeches made in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper) made an excellent speech about involving parents in schools and referred specifically to the importance of special schools. He spoke with great clarity and passion. He said that parents know their children best. That is so right, especially about children with special needs. If the Government understand the issue, they will put a moratorium on the closure of special schools so that a proper investigation can be made about why so many parents are having choice denied them. If they do so, they will be supported by us and, I am sure, by my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean.

The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James) made a powerful maiden speech. She spoke about the regeneration of Swansea. She told us that her parents told her to stand up and be counted. That is what she did today, and I am sure that she will be counted. She rightly said that the test of being a good Member of Parliament is what the MP has done to help others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace) made an excellent speech, with very few notes. He told us about the history of Lancaster prison and that, in the past, it was a place where prisoners were put in chains and whipped and where witches were killed. It was a powerful speech, but perhaps I should warn him that care must be taken when describing such policies in the House—if the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions or the current Home Secretary overhears, such things may well turn out to be Government policy, so we ought to be a little bit careful.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) made a thoughtful speech. He talked about the growing expectations in public services and said that quality costs money and that we need to rethink some of our policies, and I hope that he will help us when we do so.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) made a serious and weighty speech. She told us that her predecessors included Harold Wilson and Kilroy-Silk. I can only hope that she emulates the career of the former, rather than the latter. She has great knowledge of the NHS. She talked about foundation hospitals and payment by results. She is clearly on the Blairite wing of the Labour party. I hope that she has not picked her team a bit too late.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) made an excellent speech from Sir Teddy Taylor's old seat. He spoke clearly and passionately about service. He talked about the need to protect Hemel Hempstead hospital, and I am sure that he will fight a great campaign.

The hon. Member for Brent, South (Ms Butler) made a sparkling speech—witty and informed. She promised us some stories about Paul Boateng, but did not quite deliver. We all remember that, when he was elected, he said:

"Brent, South today; Soweto tomorrow",

and he is now our ambassador in South Africa. We do not know what her slogan is, but after that speech, I am sure that she will go a long way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) spoke about a range of things. He raised the case of the mother whose three teenage daughters had all become pregnant and the fact that she blamed the school. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) made a powerful speech about that issue as well. They are both right. We need to talk about such issues, and we need to recognise that we are all in this together. It is a matter for parents, teachers, governors and the Government, as well as for schools.

My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) made a powerful maiden speech, talking about the dangers of overdevelopment. She was generous to her predecessor, she was passionate about the voluntary sector, and she talked about the gap between people and politicians—and I am sure that she will close that gap in Guildford.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Horwood) made an interesting maiden speech. He started by defending MPs' pay and pension arrangements. I am sure that that will be go down well in some parts of the House. I am not sure how well it will go down in Cheltenham. He then went on to discuss overdevelopment and the housing targets. That will probably go down better.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) made an excellent speech. It is only right, as we have only one Scottish MP, that his constituency's name is by far the longest. It was such a good speech that it will not be long before he is pulled on to our Front Bench to speak about Scotland more often.

The hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Ms Thornberry) made an interesting maiden speech. She said that she knocked on 11,000 doors during the election campaign, but she found that most of the people were out. We suspect that they were at Islington dinner parties, but we were not told. However, it was a powerful speech, like many others, some of which, I am afraid, I have not had time to mention.

This is an 18-month Session, so there is plenty of time for the Government to get it right and to flesh out the Queen's Speech with measures and action that would really make a difference. That is what we in the Opposition want to see. We want an education policy that gets the basics right, that gives head teachers full powers over discipline and abolishes appeals panels, and that gets to grips with our examination system and restores rigour and confidence. We want to see real school freedom, with all head teachers in charge of all their budgets and all their admissions. Above all, we need Education Ministers who are prepared to take a stand on issues, face down their critics and actually make things happen.

The Government still do not seem to understand that real change cannot be achieved by forming a committee, by issuing another press release or even by passing another law. A Government must set out what they believe in and follow it through to the end, and they must recognise that we are all in this together—the Government, teachers, parents, governors and children. Central Government do not, and cannot, have all the answers.

In the past eight years, we have had three manifestos, nine Acts of Parliament, five Green Papers, three White Papers, two strategy documents and four Education Secretaries—or five if we count Lord Adonis—but look at the record: truancy up by a third, one in three pupils leaving primary school unable to write properly, and a teacher attacked every seven minutes. It is time for all the words in the Queen's Speech to be backed by action, which is why I urge all Opposition Members to join me in the Lobby tonight.

9.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Ruth Kelly): We have indeed had an excellent debate. First, let me welcome the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) to his new role. We have had the opportunity to debate issues before. I enjoyed my encounters with him when I was a Treasury Minister, and I am sure that there will be many opportunities for him and me to debate education in the coming months.

I worry that the hon. Gentleman might be a tad distracted and that he might have a little more on his mind than simply whether to continue the education policies that were recently rejected by the electorate. I fear that his most difficult challenge will be deciding whether to stand in the forthcoming Tory leadership election, or to let this one go and run to be Leader of the Opposition in a Labour fourth term. I see that the hon. Gentleman has brought many of his hon. Friends with him tonight—[HON. MEMBERS: "Where are yours?"] I am not running for the leadership of my party.

If the hon. Gentleman throws his hat in the ring, I know that Labour Members will want to join me in wishing him success in the forthcoming Tory leadership campaign. Indeed, we will wish him more success than he enjoyed during his time as policy guru during the latest Tory election campaign. Labour Members, who are committed to social justice and believe that all young people should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, hope that he can indeed overcome the odds and bring about a triumph of compassionate conservatism over the SAS darling of the Tory right.

I enjoyed the hon. Gentleman's speech and his typical ebullient style. It was perhaps a wise strategy for the bright young thing of the Conservative party to concentrate on personalities rather than defending his party's policies, not least because he was the architect of a school voucher policy that was so extreme that it was rejected by not just Keith Joseph, but Margaret Thatcher. After all, the hon. Gentleman recently admitted to his local newspaper that he was "biased" about the education chapter of the Conservative manifesto because, in his own words, he "helped write it". What is his policy on school reform? Is he going forward, or back? Is his policy the same prescription of selection, vouchers and under-investment, or will he think again? I challenge him to come up with some fresh ideas and look forward to debating them.

Let me take a moment to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's predecessor, Tim Collins. He and I never quite saw eye to eye on education policy, as might be expected, but he argued his case here in Parliament and throughout the country during the election campaign—so much so, in fact, that it cost him his seat. However, he showed great dignity in defeat and I respect him for that.

I also take this opportunity to welcome the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) to his new role. I knew him before he entered the House, and I am sure that he will make a great contribution to the debates in months to come.

It is a privilege to wind up the debate. Hon. Members will know that the Government's general election manifesto promised continued investment and reform in the public services. Several hon. Members on both sides of the House made remarkably strong contributions about the need for continued investment in child care, schools and local hospitals and health services. Indeed, several of them lobbied for more resources, especially in the health service.

I was most impressed by some of the contributions from Labour Members, although there were also outstanding contributions by other hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mrs. James) gave a passionate and personal speech about her life in Swansea and her campaign—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. An awful lot of private conversation is going on. It is good manners to hear the Secretary of State.

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend drew on her experiences from the miners strike. She focused in particular on her campaign for women and child care, which I know she will continue during her time in the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) brought her front-line experiences of the health service to the debate, and pledged to continue to campaign to improve health services in her constituency and across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern) talked about how his constituency is a university town and has benefited from the Government's education policies.

In particular, I enjoyed the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Ms Butler), who, in succeeding Paul Boateng, will contribute in months to come to ensuring that her constituency has a strong representation in Parliament. Her focus on skills as an agent of regeneration is something to which I am committed. As a Government, we intend to ensure that skills transform opportunities for all young people and adults.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) welcomed the new city academies, bringing aspiration to people in her community. The city academy programme can do an enormous amount to transform opportunities for the most disadvantaged children in the most deprived areas. I look forward to working with her on that agenda over the months to come.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, North (Ms Johnson) mentioned the contribution that Hull has made to improving school meals for children in

[Ruth Kelly]

the city. That is another way in which we can do an enormous amount to ensure that children benefit from healthy living.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods) noted how unemployment had halved in Durham since the Government came to power. We had a strong contribution from my long-standing friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Ms Thornberry). I learned much more about her constituency than the common perception that normally prevails. I wish her well, and a great future in the House. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith), who wanted more 14-to-19 vocational provision. I want to join her in ensuring that we deliver that across the country in the years to come.

In the Gracious Speech, we set out a serious programme for government. We want a world-class education system in which every child matters and is helped to reach their full potential.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am reluctant to interrupt the right hon. Lady's fascinating and lively peroration, but will she explain to my constituents why they cannot get an NHS dentist, which led to 1,600 people queuing for eight hours in Spalding in an attempt to register for a dentist? That is not good enough. It is down to this Government. Will she either defend it or do something about it here tonight?

Ruth Kelly: The hon. Gentleman has a short memory. It was his party that closed two dental training hospitals. It is this Government who are employing 1,000 more NHS dentists this year.

In our party's manifesto and in the Gracious Speech we explained how we would continue to reduce the number of failing schools, how we would open up choice for parents, how we would tailor education to the needs of every child, relentlessly focusing on the basics, as the hon. Member for Witney acknowledges we should, but also how we would provide opportunities for every child to be stretched to their full potential. Central to this party's programme is school discipline, and I hope that we can establish a consensus across the House on the need for orderly classrooms and good school discipline, and that we can work with parents, with teachers and with everybody in society to develop a culture of respect which means that we have good discipline in our schools. We have made real progress in tackling bad behaviour in the classroom, but zero tolerance of bad behaviour, and the culture of respect, good behaviour and firm discipline, must be the norm in all classrooms, in all schools, all of the time.

This Government have given schools the powers, training and guidance that they need to deal with destructive behaviour, but we know that the real work is done not by Government, but by teachers and classroom assistants working on the front line with those pupils. That is why we, as a Government, will continue to back head teachers and teachers so that they can take the necessary action to address this issue. The hon. Gentleman also knows that we cannot just legislate for good order in the classroom; it has to be delivered with the full backing of teachers and parents. That is why we will work with them on making sure that there is a cultural change, and that effective practice in the best classrooms is translated to every classroom across the country. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support us when the expert group of head teachers reports, that he will support our work with the teaching profession and that he will back the measures that we take as a result.

Mr. Andrew Turner: The Government have been in power for eight years. How long does it take to train an NHS dentist?

Ruth Kelly: If the hon. Gentleman had done his research before coming to the House, he would know that it takes eight years to train an NHS dentist, and it is this Government who are employing 1,000 more NHS dentists this year. That will have an impact over the coming years.

I will continue to listen to teachers and parents as we deliver our manifesto commitments in the Gracious Speech to extend opportunities for all children to succeed on the basis of their hard work and merit, not on the basis of their privilege or social class. Our 10-year child care strategy, published last December, set out our plans to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life. By 2010 there will be 3,500 children's centres, one in every community, so that every family with young children has easy access to high-quality integrated services. Every child will be able to benefit from activities taking place before and after school, as schools open up their facilities for use by the community—pupils and parents.

We will continue our efforts to raise standards in primary and secondary schools, working with teachers to provide tailored support for children, with catch-up for those who struggle in the basics and challenge for the more able. We will raise the bar in schools, recognising that all young people should achieve GCSE standard in English and maths by the time they leave. For the first time, as a result of our policies, our young people will have access to high-quality, high-status vocational education. We will introduce four specialised diplomas by 2008 and seven by 2010, leading in time to a full entitlement of 14 in each locality. We want far more of our young people to be staying on in education or training or entering an apprenticeship—far more than we have at the moment.

On this side of the House, we have always been clear about one thing: we want parents to choose schools, not schools to choose parents. That is why we have continued to invest in our state schools. We want to improve quality and choice in the provision of schooling and build on the progress already made to improve educational standards for all, including—

David Maclean (Penrith and The Border) (Con) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 241, Noes 336.

Division No. 1] **[9.59pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Alexander, Danny *(Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John *(Billericay)*
Beith, rh Alan
Benyon, Richard *(Newbury)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Brian
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Jeremy *(Taunton)*
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Alistair *(North-East Bedfordshire)*
Burt, Lorely *(Solihull)*
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, David
Campbell, Gregory *(Londonderry)*
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies *(North-East Fife)*
Carmichael, Alistair
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg *(Tunbridge Wells)*
Clarke, rh Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clegg, Nick
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham and Stamford)*
Davies, David T. C. *(Monmouth)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan *(Rutland and Melton)*
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias
Evans, Nigel
Evennett, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael *(Sevenoaks)*
Farron, Tim *(Westmorland and Lonsdale)*
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mark *(Cities of London and Westminster)*
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
George, Andrew *(St. Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Paul *(Wycombe)*
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip *(Runnymede & Weybridge)*
Hammond, Stephen *(Wimbledon)*
Hancock, Mike
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan *(Oxford, W & Abingdon)*
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Horwood, Martin
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howarth, David *(Cambridge)*
Hughes, Simon *(N Southwark & Bermondsey)*
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Jeremy
Hurd, Nick
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart *(Peterborough)*
Johnson, Boris *(Henley)*
Jones, David *(Clwyd, W)*
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Knight, rh Greg *(E Yorks)*
Kramer, Susan
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, John
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David *(Yeovil)*
Leech, John
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian *(New Forest, E)*
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria *(Basingstoke)*
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Andrew *(Sutton Coldfield)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Brooks
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, George *(Tatton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Prisk, Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh *(Faversham & Mid-Kent)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewkesbury)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast, E)*
Robinson, Mrs. Iris *(Strangford)*
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Scott, Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Simpson, David *(Upper Bann)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Aberdeen & K)*
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Graham *(Manchester, Blackley)*
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew *(Isle of Wight)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Charles
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Roger *(Brecon and Radnorshire)*
Williams, Stephen *(Bristol, W)*
Williams, Mark *(Ceredigion)*
Willis, Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Sammy *(East Antrim)*
Wilson, Rob *(Reading, E)*
Winterton, Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Sir Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wright, Jeremy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Young, rh George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Crispin Blunt and
Mr. Henry Bellingham

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Bob *(Coventry, N E)*
Alexander, rh Douglas *(Paisley and Renfrewshire, S)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David *(Blaydon)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale and Darwen)*
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian *(Dudley, North)*
Austin, John *(Erith and Thamesmead)*
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Kevin *(Rother Valley)*
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret

Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell
Brown, rh Nicholas *(N'castle upon Tyne, E and Wallsend)*
Brown, Lyn *(West Ham)*
Browne, rh Des *(Kilmarnock and Loudoun)*
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Stephen
Byrne, Liam
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth Valley)*
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Caton, Martin
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clark, Katy *(North Ayrshire and Arran)*
Clarke, rh Tom *(Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)*
Clarke, rh Charles *(Norfolk, S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin *(Livingston)*
Cook, Frank *(Stockton, N)*
Cooper, Yvette *(Pontefract and C)*
Cooper, Rosie *(W Lancashire)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(C'try, S)*
Cunningham, Tony *(Workington)*
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(Liverpool, Garston)*
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce *(Walsall, S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen *(Bishop Auckland)*
Griffith, Nia *(Llanelli)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh, S)*
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds, N-E)*
Hamilton, David *(Midlothian)*
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom *(Glasgow, S)*
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley *(Stretford & Urmston)*
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana *(Kingston upon Hull, N)*
Johnson, rh Alan *(Kingston upon Hull, W & H)*
Jones, Dr. Lynne *(B'ham, Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, S)*
Jones, Kevan *(North Durham)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington, N)*
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane *(Liverpool, Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Knight, Jim *(South Dorset)*
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury, S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacNeil, Angus
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Malliaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Ms Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John *(Hayes and Harlington)*
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Meacher, rh Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward *(Doncaster, N)*
Miliband, rh David *(South Shields)*
Miller, Andrew *(Ellesmere Port & Neston)*
Mitchell, Austin *(Great Grimsby)*
Moffat, Anne *(East Lothian)*
Moffatt, Laura *(Crawley)*
Mole, Chris
Moon, Ms Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Ms Meg
Murphy, Jim *(East Renfrewshire)*
Murphy, rh Paul *(Torfaen)*
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(North Warwickshire)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra *(Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock)*
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Bridget *(Lewisham, E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Price, Adam
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Jamie *(Copeland)*
Reed, Andy *(Loughborough)*
Reid, rh. John *(Airdrie and Shotts)*
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John *(Glasgow, N-W)*
Robertson, Angus *(Moray)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Coventry, N-W)*
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(City of Chester)*
Ryan, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham, S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Angela E *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Andrew *(Oxford, E)*
Smith, rh Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Ms Angela C *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David *(N-W Leicestershire)*
Taylor, Dari *(Stockton, S)*
Taylor, Dr. Richard *(Wyre Forest)*
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Timms, Stephen

Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond *(Brighton, Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Robert
Watts, Dave
Weir, Mike
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Hywel *(Caernarfon)*
Williams, Betty *(Conwy)*
Williams, rh Alan *(Swansea, W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster, Central)*
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr. Tony *(Cannock Chase)*
Wright, Anthony *(Great Yarmouth)*
Wright, Iain *(Hartlepool)*
Wright, David *(Telford)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Vernon Coaker and
Mr. Ian Cawsey

Question accordingly negatived.

It being after Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Income Tax

10.17 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (John Healey): I beg to move,

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Aruba) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motions:

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Netherlands Antilles) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Virgin Islands) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Montserrat) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.

John Healey: I welcome the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) to his place for the first time on the Front Bench, and I welcome his appointment. He is well informed on these issues and takes a serious-minded view of them, and I look forward to the debates that we will have—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. I ask hon. Members to calm down and be quiet, or, if they so wish, to leave the Chamber.

John Healey: The orders are the last of the bilateral agreements relating to the European Union savings directive to be presented to the House. Equivalent agreements for the Crown dependencies were debated and approved by the Merits Committee on 14 March 2005.

Three other bilateral agreements relating to the EU savings directive—

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Minister's microphone is not on and we cannot hear him.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is very helpful. Perhaps the technicians can look at the microphone system.

John Healey: It might have been deliberate and for the benefit of the House on this subject that the microphones were not on.

The three other bilateral agreements relating to the EU savings directive have been signed between the UK and Anguilla, the Cayman islands and the Turks and Caicos islands. These agreements do not require the UK to provide information to those territories, so it is not necessary for them to be debated by the House. However, I have ensured today that copies of those agreements have been placed in the Library.

The House will recall how the agreements came about. It was in 1999 at the Helsinki European Council that the European Union agreed that

"all citizens resident in a Member State of the European Union should pay the tax due on all their savings income"

[John Healey]

The UK Government fully supported that principle and believed that exchange of information on as wide a basis as possible was the best way to counter cross-border tax evasion.

Original proposals for a directive consisting of an EU withholding tax were rejected by the UK. We fought hard to get an agreement that exchange of information was the right way to counter such tax evasion. Our success was directly attributable to the role that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer played in that process. The former Liberal Democrat spokesman on these matters conceded in Committee on 14 March that avoiding the withholding tax was "a battle well won".

The EU savings directive, as adopted, will not put at risk the competitiveness of EU financial markets, as an EU-wide withholding tax certainly would have done. Under the directive, paying agents will report details of payments of savings income—essentially interest income—that they make to individuals resident in prescribed territories. Paying agents will make reports annually to HM Revenue and Customs, which will pass the details to relevant tax authorities in the other member state. The UK will receive information on UK residents who are paid savings income by paying agents in those countries.

The EU recognised the strong arguments also advanced first by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor that the global nature of financial markets meant that the principles of the directive also needed to be adopted in financial centres outside the European Union before the directive could go ahead.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): How will the banks or other agents know the residence of their deposit holders? Surely, the deposit holders who wish to get around the arrangements that are now in place will simply not say that they are resident in the EU and will take their money in a bank account in a tax haven.

John Healey: That is precisely the sort of information that paying agents collect and hold on their customers. We would expect that to be part and parcel of the information that they have on the customer base.

It was therefore agreed that the application by member states of the directive will be contingent on the application of the same measures by certain dependent and associated territories of member states and of equivalent measures by certain third countries—the USA, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Andorra, Monaco and San Marino. All agreements making up this network have now been signed. We are now working to ensure that all ratification procedures are completed in time for the directive and the associated agreements to take effect from 1 July this year.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): The Financial Secretary has given the House an indication that it is institutionalised investors who will be covered by the proposals. If private individuals have private arrangements for the payment of interest on some form of personal loan, for example, how will they be captured?

John Healey: I shall come in a moment to the application of the agreements. Essentially, they are restricted to the income on savings made by individuals.

The exchange agreements are reciprocal between the UK and each of Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. They provide for the effective taxation of savings income payments made cross-border from paying agents in one territory to individuals resident in the other. Montserrat and Aruba have opted to exchange information on savings income payments immediately.

For an initial transitional period, which corresponds to the transitional period of the directive, the British Virgin Islands and the Netherlands Antilles will levy a withholding tax on relevant payments, unless the taxpayer elects for information to be reported to their home state. Those territories applying a withholding tax will pass 75 per cent. of the revenue obtained to the United Kingdom, and they will keep the remaining 25 per cent. in order to cover collection costs. At the end of the transition period, both the British Virgin Islands and the Netherlands Antilles will automatically exchange the information covered by the agreement, although both territories have the option to do so earlier.

The information will be passed in accordance with strict rules to ensure the confidentiality of the information supplied. Information cannot be used for any purpose other than direct taxation without the prior written consent of the party that provided it. And only those persons concerned with direct tax matters may have access to the information.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): What is the Financial Secretary's estimate of the amount of tax that will be saved by the European Union as a result of this complex and important change?

John Healey: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, when any Government deal with tax evasion, it is always difficult to be certain about the scale of the activity and the value of the funds that are being defrauded from the Exchequer, so it is difficult to make a precise estimate. I refer him to the regulatory impact assessment that we published on the EU savings directive two years ago, which set out our estimate of the full impact of the EU savings directive on the UK. Our best estimate was that in the first full year the revenue gained by the Treasury would be in the order of £60 million to £70 million.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): What is the Financial Secretary's assessment of the population of taxpayers who are likely to be brought within the curtilage of the regulations?

John Healey: I do not want to repeat myself, but it is extremely difficult to be precise about figures in matters of tax evasion and tax avoidance. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the regulatory impact assessment that we published a couple of years ago.

The Government are pleased to have reached an agreement with each of Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba. The exchange of information on savings income on as wide a basis as possible continues to be our ultimate objective and that of the EU. The agreements are a further step towards achieving that objective, and I commend them to the House.

10.28 pm

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I hope that I will not detain the House for too long—I note with some approval that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) are not present tonight.

I thank the Financial Secretary for his kind words about my appointment, and I congratulate him on his elevation to his current role. I also thank him for his explanation of the motions.

Conservative Members accept that the motions would normally be subject to scrutiny via the statutory instrument procedure, but the relevant Committees have not been composed. Time is tight—not in relation to this particular debate, although I hope that we will conclude well before the 90-minute limit—because, as the Financial Secretary has rightly pointed out, the agreements must be signed, ratified and have taken effect in the relevant territories before 1 July. With the ECOFIN meeting on 7 June, it is prudent to ask us tonight to move ahead in that way.

As the Financial Secretary pointed out, the information exchange route has been supported by both sides of the House as a means of avoiding the need for a withholding tax. We want to maintain that light-touch approach. Although we would generally prefer full scrutiny of such agreements in Committee, it is right to acknowledge that the wording of the draft agreements is the same as that of those that the House ratified in March for three other dependent territories, namely the Crown dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. Accordingly, we are happy to express our support.

10.30 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) in congratulating the Financial Secretary on his promotion. I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his nomination to the Front Bench.

I wish to place it on record that, despite all the work on and good intentions in agreements such as those that have been reached between the European Union and the four territories, they will not be effective. People who are intent on evading tax will continue to do that by one of two simple expedients. First, they could move their funds out of the territories in the knowledge that the regime will change. Is it part of the agreement that the authorities in the territories inform the EU or the tax authorities in EU countries of whether existing deposit holders there, who are believed to be resident in the EU, now move their funds out? Will the Inland Revenue or any such authority in the EU know about that? It is the obvious response of someone who is determined to continue to avoid or evade tax.

I suggested the second response in my earlier intervention. People will simply say that they are not resident in the EU. I presume that, in cases of doubt, depositors will now be asked whether they are resident in the EU. It is clearly a question that expects the answer "no" in the case of people who are determined to avoid tax in the EU. They will simply register their residence in some territory—perhaps Outer Mongolia—that does not have an agreement with the EU. There is no danger of credit risk to the depositor in doing that because the funds will remain in a particular bank in a specific territory. It is possible for depositors to examine their accounts and talk to their fund managers on the spot so no one will know whether they are resident in, for example, Outer Mongolia or Somalia. They may transfer their funds into some Liechtenstein Anstalt or a similar corporate vehicle, which will then be the deposit holder and resident outside the EU.

There are so many ways around the matter that the Government are deluding themselves if they believe that they have found an effective remedy for that form of tax evasion.

10.33 pm

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): If the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) considers some of the territories where he suggested that there was no serious credit risk, he would realise that he would perhaps breach Financial Services Authority rules if he advised any of his constituents to go there.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman completely misunderstood the point of my comments. No credit risk is established by claiming that one is resident in Somalia or Outer Mongolia, but depositing one's money there might entail considerable credit risk. However, one does not need to do that. One could keep the money in the Cayman Islands or the Netherlands Antilles and simply claim that one is resident in Ulan Bator.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman perhaps anticipates my remarks a little. The agreements that refer to the territories that we are discussing are frankly a sideshow. I happened to be in the European Parliament when they came through. They were a price that several Ministers paid to get agreement on the more substantive measure and overall taxation agreement. Although it was a necessary price, and some problems that the hon. Gentleman described might arise, the territories do not compete with the major financial centres in the EU because of the extra credit risk that one would undertake if one decided to put all one's cash in the Cayman Islands rather than London, Paris or Frankfurt.

The real point about the information exchange agreement—we very much support it—is not, frankly, the sideshow issues of these rather insignificant territories, but the much more significant failure of the major countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development so far to achieve a real agreement on information exchange. The United States Internal Revenue Service, for example, has been extremely successful in persuading the Swiss banks to give it information about American residents who have

[Chris Huhne]

deposits with the Swiss banks, mainly by applying pressure on those banks through their subsidiaries in New York city.

Through such heavy breathing, as it were, the Americans have been extremely effective in ensuring de facto information exchange between Switzerland and the US tax authorities. That is unfortunately not the case with the United Kingdom or with other EU countries, and I very much hope that the Minister can tell us whether a little progress has been made in extending the impact of these tax information exchange agreements not to places such as the Netherlands Antilles, but to the real centres, in which there is a major problem.

Mr. Gummer: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in the light of the issues that he raises, we should ask the Minister whether information could be made available to the House at the end of the first year showing whether the £60 million figure had been met? This is a complicated and expensive undertaking, and most of us would like to know whether the facts after the event are anything like those before it. If such information were provided, we would all be much happier.

Chris Huhne: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, not least because I know of no instance when my party has been against the publication of, or transparency of, financial or other information. The provision of such information by the Treasury would certainly be a step forward.

In broadly welcoming this approach, I ask the Minister to respond not only to the points that I have raised but to that raised by my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Andrew George). In fact, he did not ask the Minister how many people were likely to be brought within the curtilage—I believe that he used that splendid phrase—of this regulation; rather, he asked how many people were likely to be taxpayers in those territories. That information is not given in the explanatory memorandum and I would not expect the Minister to have it at his fingertips, but perhaps he could inform my hon. Friend in due course about the number of potential taxpayers who will be affected by the agreements before the House.

Although I am broadly supportive of the measures, I would like the Minister to provide a brief update on the progress made on information exchange between the United States and Switzerland—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the debate tonight is on the orders before the House, not on any other issue.

Chris Huhne: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have concluded my remarks.

10.38 pm

John Healey: Perhaps I should start where we finished and welcome the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) to this House and to the Liberal Democrat Front Bench. It is clear that he will bring to bear on our proceedings his experience in the European Parliament. You cautioned him, Madam Deputy Speaker, and he certainly did range rather more widely than the limited terms of the orders before us. I am sure that we will have a chance to deal with those issues in a future debate, and I look forward to doing so.

I should say in passing to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) that he has a point—up to a point. It is clear that the agreements relating to the four territories and the legislation to ratify them, which we are considering tonight, are a step towards dealing with the problem of systematic tax evasion. They are not the complete answer and they can be undermined and avoided, as is often the case with anti-avoidance and anti-evasion measures. I simply say that it was not clear precisely what the hon. Gentleman was arguing. He seemed to be either arguing in favour of a withholding tax or a heavier-duty measure to deal with the problem, or offering a counsel of despair. That seemed to suggest that there was little that we could do or should try to do in response to these problems, which I simply do not accept.

In response to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), I appreciate his acknowledgement of the importance of these measures, particularly his acknowledgement of the rather unorthodox way in which we have brought them to the Floor of the House rather than to the Merits Committee upstairs. In doing so, we have put the UK in the best possible position to continue the leadership that we have displayed from the outset in getting the exchange of information agreements in place. They number nearly 250, and the four that we are ratifying this evening are important contributions. The House, in approving these orders tonight, will play a small but important part in ensuring that the exchange of information to implement the EU savings directive can come into effect, as intended, on 1 July this year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Aruba) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.

INCOME TAX

Resolved,

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Netherlands Antilles) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.—*[John Healey]*

Resolved,

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Virgin Islands) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.—*[John Healey]*

Resolved,

That the draft Tax Information Exchange Agreement (Taxes on Income) (Montserrat) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 17th May, be approved.—*[John Healey]*

REGLATORY REFORM

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1) (Consideration of draft regulatory reform orders),

FIRE SAFETY

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which was laid before the House on 17th March, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT (WHITSUN)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 26th May, do adjourn till Monday 6th June 2005.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 14th, 21st and 28th October; 11th November; 2nd December 2005; 20th January; 24th February; 10th and 17th March; 12th May; 16th June; 14th July and 20th October 2006.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

Russell Clamp

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

10.42 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise the case of Russell Clamp this evening. He is one of my constituents, married to a Filipino lady, and has one child. On 11 February 1990, he went to the United Arab Emirates and he was employed in that country for six years. On 9 November 1996 he set up small business there, called Leisure International. In 1997, this successful company expanded into larger premises and began to flourish. By May 2001, the company was able to expand again; it changed its name to Vision, and by that stage the opening of a second office, this time in Dubai, was planned.

The company was doing extremely well, but in June 2001 some Government officials announced that they wished to see my constituent. Efforts to telephone both offices to establish what would happen resulted in nothing. When he arrived at the office, his staff were sitting in reception with police officers, who checked his ID and asked him about another company about which he did not know. They passed it off at the time as a routine inquiry. Then, however, they closed his offices, boxed up his possessions, removed them and arrested my constituent and his manager, transferring Mr. Clamp to a high security facility. They removed all personal items, and refused to let him contact his wife or consular staff. It was several hours before he was even given water and the option to visit a lavatory. At no point was he told why he was there.

It appeared that the embassy was not allowed access because the case was, allegedly, so severe. Mr. Clamp's local sponsor in Dubai reacted to the situation by trying to contact several people over the next few days, only to find that all of them were under arrest without being charged. It then became clear that the companies under suspicion were the Middle East Research Group and another one called the SSS Corporate Research Dubai Group. Mr. Clamp had shared an office with the latter's sister company several years previously. That was the extent of my constituent's link with the companies under suspicion.

As a result of those goings-on, my constituent's trade licence was cancelled while he was still in confinement. His bank account was completely emptied, as was the company's account. The money is now reported to be untraceable.

On 3 July, Mr. Clamp was released from prison on what was called bail release. He had to surrender the passports of his wife and son, and was given a holding charge—which was not pressed subsequently—of conducting activities inconsistent with his trade licence. United Arab Emirates law states that the passports of a child and wife cannot be used for security.

After Mr. Clamp was released, he met up with others who had also been released from the same investigation. It appeared that the company SSS Corporate Research had a connection with Israel, and that Leisure International—the company that Mr. Clamp first set up—had done work in the past for SSS. Two days later,

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

he was contacted by the British embassy and told that the prosecutor in Abu Dhabi wanted to ask some questions. Four appointments were made, which were not kept by that official.

On his final attempt to keep the appointment, Mr. Clamp was handcuffed and taken to a police holding cell in Dubai. Once again, he was stripped of all personal belongings. He was put in a cell with 16 other people. The cell was filthy, and its floor covered with rotten food and spit. The lavatory facilities were only very basic, and there were cockroaches. The 17 people in the cell had to sleep with their legs entwined.

Over the next five or six days, my constituent received several beatings from Arab inmates. He sustained two broken ribs, nine broken teeth, open wounds to his spine and lower back, and bruises over his entire body. In the end, he was moved into solitary confinement. He says that that cell was filthy but that at least he was safe from being beaten.

Eventually, his wife was allowed to see him, the guard duty relaxed and he was allowed books, but he remained in solitary confinement for months. On 3 September, he was taken down to see a judge and chief prosecutor. The next day, he was released once again, this time on passport bail, until the conclusion of the investigation. He was told to report for questioning in two days, and he did so. However, in three months, he was never questioned once.

Mr. Clamp reported to the prosecutor, who said that he did not want to see him, as he was not central to the case. Eventually—and I mean eventually—Mr. Clamp obtained some medical treatment and was allowed to re-enter his office. He found that everything—all the equipment and his expensive personal possessions—had been removed.

Mr. Clamp sent a letter to the prosecutor about the missing items, to which the response was that they could not be traced. He made no further claim in respect of his personal possessions because that would have meant that he would have remained without his passport while an investigation took place.

Mr. Clamp spent his remaining time in the Emirates settling as much business as he could, but that was more or less impossible, as his accounts had been illegally closed down. However, he says that in that period he received support from people in both the European and Arab communities.

There were some problems to be resolved before he was allowed to re-enter the UK, but he arrived back on 5 March 2002 to be greeted by friends bearing warm coats. They then stayed with those friends for a few weeks until the local borough council managed to come up with emergency accommodation. Attempts from this country to secure the return of property that was taken in Dubai have been unsuccessful.

I am grateful for the support that I have had from Mr. Paul Sizeman of the Foreign Office, who has made himself available to meet me on two occasions. He has contacted our embassy in the Emirates and has done his best to clarify the position. Nevertheless, in the end, all that he has been able to do is to repeat the advice that the chief prosecutor gave to Mr. Clamp, which was that he should pursue a legal claim against the police who had sealed the office and had responsibility for its security. The Foreign Office admits that it does not know whether Mr. Clamp has made any attempt to pursue such a claim. Well, we have to move in the real world. On the subject of whether he should have attempted to bring a legal action in the Emirates, Mr. Clamp says that it would have been impossible. His passport would be retained for the duration of the case and that could last for 10 to 15 years with massive legal costs—when everything had been taken from him—and even if the court decided in his favour he could still be held in the country while it was decided if an appeal would be made. For that reason, he has not been able to pursue legal action in the Emirates.

The Emirates are not a banana republic. They are not some poverty-stricken third world country. They are more than able to afford decent prison conditions for those who, regrettably, have to be housed there. They are a country supposedly under the rule of law, but there is no redress under that law for people who are victims of its abuse, rather than its use and reasonable exercise. I am seriously concerned about this case and I am concerned by the apparent impotence of the Foreign Office in dealing with it. I do not mean that as a criticism. I do not suggest that the Foreign Office has not tried to deal with the matter, but it would appear to be as impotent as Mr. Clamp to achieve any result.

I understand that our ambassador to the Emirates will visit this country in the not-too-distant future and I would be grateful for an opportunity to have a meeting with him directly. Failing that, I would like to go out to that country that treats its successful foreign residents so abominably, to ask officials face to face what will be done, even at this late stage. It is perhaps worth citing Prisoners Abroad, which today told my local television station that it has many cases, but never does any time go by when it does not have at least one outstanding case from the Emirates.

It is time to say openly and without fear that the Emirates are not living up to the standards that they are well capable of living up to, and the Foreign Office and—with all due respect—the Foreign Secretary should be a little more energetic in dealing with the fulfilment of their obligations.

10.53 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on securing a debate on the case of Russell Clamp, who—as she has reminded us—was detained with seven other British nationals in the United Arab Emirates in 2001. I welcome the opportunity to set out our position clearly in relation to that unfortunate case and to remind the right hon. Lady of some of the options available to Mr. Clamp to take forward his claims.

Before concentrating on the specifics of the case, it is worth noting the ever closer ties between Britain and the UAE. I am sure that the right hon. Lady will welcome those ties. I hope that some of the abuses that she mentioned will be the subject of discussion and debate between our two countries as we grow closer.

The UK and the Emirates enjoy a close bilateral relationship, reflected in strong mutual flows of trade, investment and people. Our two countries have many

shared interests, and I am pleased to say that there is shared commitment, at the highest levels, to strengthen our co-operation. The UAE has become an increasingly popular destination for British tourists; there were about 650,000 British visitors to the United Arab Emirates in 2004. It is also a growing market for British trade. The volume of new companies with British interests continues to increase and, of course, as many as 100,000 British nationals are resident in the UAE.

Despite those large numbers, the vast majority of visits to the UAE are trouble-free. It is important to recognise that the arrest of British nationals remains, I am thankful to say, a rare event, although I take the right hon. Lady's point that, nevertheless, issues arise. When a British national, such as Mr. Clamp, gets into difficulties, we are committed to giving all the practicable consular assistance we can.

I would like to add to the description of the case put to the House by the right hon. Lady and, if I may, place it in its wider context. As she reminded us, Russell Clamp was one of eight British nationals, from four Dubai and Abu Dhabi-based companies, who were arrested and detained at Dubai police headquarters on 26 June 2001. The police told our embassies in Abu Dhabi and Dubai that they were being held in connection with the possession of illegal surveillance equipment.

Russell Clamp worked for Leisure International and assisted SSS Corporate Research, a subsidiary of International Corporate Research, based in both Abu Dhabi and Dubai. ICR stated that its role was that of a commercial investigator, specifically providing information on companies, markets and competition in the region.

Consular staff visited the detainees on 2 July. None had any complaints and all appeared to be in very good spirits. Mr. Clamp did not raise concerns about his detention or about the treatment he had received from the authorities. If he had done so, we would have raised those concerns immediately with the local authorities. On 3 July, the eight detainees were released on bail while the UAE authorities continued their investigations. Our embassy in Dubai had no further contact with Mr. Clamp after his release.

Following Mr. Clamp's release in Dubai, a warrant was issued for his arrest in Abu Dhabi. His company, Leisure International, had offices in two emirates—Dubai and Abu Dhabi—meaning that he had to follow a separate judicial process in each. As the right hon. Lady reminded us, he was arrested for a second time in Abu Dhabi on 14 July and detained until 3 September, when he was once again released on bail. The account of his detention that the right hon. Lady gave us was extremely distressing and I shall certainly attempt to pursue the details. However, I have to tell her that I am informed that consular officials visited Mr. Clamp regularly during his second period of detention. Again, at no point did he mention any mistreatment and our staff saw no evidence to support such claims during their visits.

Our embassies in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi were satisfied that all the usual arrest procedures were followed. We take allegations of human rights abuses seriously and we are certainly committed to investigating any allegations quickly and without delay. However, Mr. Clamp did not make allegations about mistreatment at any time during his detention, although he had the opportunity to do so during the visits from our consular staff, who maintained regular contact with him following his release on bail on 3 September.

On 9 October 2001, the British vice-consul accompanied Mr. Clamp to a meeting with the chief prosecutor in Abu Dhabi. Mr. Clamp told the chief prosecutor that he had visited his old office to retrieve some personal items to sell them. He said that his office was totally bare and asked if his personal possessions had been taken for safe keeping when the office was raided—a perfectly sensible question to ask. The chief prosecutor checked the inventory of items removed from Leisure International, but there was no record of those items that Mr. Clamp claimed were missing. The chief prosecutor suggested that Mr. Clamp take out a civil claim against the police who had been guarding the premises. Mr. Clamp chose not to act on that advice.

On 18 November 2001, Mr. Clamp and Andrew Collier both had their passports returned by the authorities in Abu Dhabi. On 24 June 2002, the other detainees had their passports returned by the authorities in Dubai. No formal charges were ever brought against the detainees. Our consular staff in both Abu Dhabi and Dubai had continued to offer all appropriate assistance throughout that difficult period.

I shall deal for a moment with our efforts with the UAE authorities throughout the process. We raised our concerns at the lack of progress on the case at a high level with the UAE authorities and expressed our desire for a quick judicial conclusion to the case on several occasions. In January 2002, Baroness Amos wrote a letter to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, expressing our wish that the case be concluded without further delay. Similar concerns were conveyed by Baroness Symons in early June 2002.

We fully sympathise with Mr. Clamp's wish to see the return of any missing property. However, we cannot get directly involved in such a claim on Mr. Clamp's behalf. Our ambassador has consulted our honorary legal advisor in the UAE who has clearly explained our position. As the local authorities allegedly impounded personal items belonging to Mr. Clamp, it would be appropriate for Mr. Clamp to appoint a lawyer in an attempt to retrieve any belongings and assets. I understand full well the right hon. Lady's explanation of why he has not done that, but that was the advice received. If it becomes clear that the authorities cannot establish the whereabouts of his belongings, Mr. Clamp has the option of pursuing a case for compensation against the local authorities. Any claim for compensation must be made through a local lawyer, who would take the matter to the courts.

Miss Widdecombe: I appreciate that there are all sorts of legal avenues open to my constituent, but the Minister will be aware that, in that country, all sorts of legal avenues can be open to someone that, in practice, can never be pursued. Mr. Clamp could not pursue a legal action against the authorities in the Emirates, either at this stage or when he was there, because, as the Minister will be aware, he was not allowed to leave the

[Miss Widdecombe]

country, he could not work in the country and there is no welfare system in the Emirates. Against that background, how on earth was he to pursue a legal case?

Dr. Howells: I certainly take the point that the right hon. Lady makes—it is a difficult issue—but I hope that she can take the point that it is impossible for our consular officials to become involved in the way that I sense she feels that they should become involved in taking the case forward. There is a big difference between diplomatic pressure—if the House would accept that phrase—and becoming involved in a civil case against the police. I do not think that we can possibly do that.

Miss Widdecombe: That is absolutely true, and I am not such a child that I would ask the Minister to take up my constituent's case and pursue it with the authorities. What I want taken up with the authorities is the process and the assistance that could be made available there for Mr. Clamp to pursue his case. Let me simply summarise thus: this was a man who went to the Emirates and had a successful company. As a result of being arrested for an offence with which he was never charged, he has lost everything from his company and all his personal possessions there, but there seems to be no route through which he can easily go to secure justice. That is the point that I am making.

Dr. Howells: I take the point that the right hon. Lady makes and I do not underestimate the great difficulties that Mr. Clamp faces. I hope that I will bring her a little bit of good news towards the end of my speech.

Should Mr. Clamp find some means of pursuing a claim, our embassy in Abu Dhabi can certainly discuss the worth and status of local lawyers with him. I believe that there are good lawyers there, but that could probably be discussed another time. We have certainly offered all appropriate consular assistance to both Mr. Clamp and the other British nationals following his unfortunate detention. We are unable to interfere in the judicial process of other countries and firmly believe that interventions at this late stage in the UAE would probably have a negative impact on the more proximate cases that are under way at the moment, to which the right hon. Lady referred.

I fully understand the right hon. Lady's concerns about the circumstances of the case, but think that it is important to highlight the huge effort and commitment shown by our consular staff throughout its duration. Our staff have to work within the laws of the UAE and continue to do an excellent job in ensuring that the welfare concerns of all British nationals are addressed.

Our ambassador in Abu Dhabi is returning to the UK on 14 June 2005 and has offered to discuss Mr. Clamp's case with the right hon. Lady. He can provide extensive local knowledge and explain the political and judicial considerations that he and his staff must follow during their work in the United Arab Emirates. I am certain that he could offer far better advice to her than I because he has the local knowledge, knows the situation on the ground and is familiar with the details of the case. I hope that she will welcome the opportunity to discuss the case and the limitations of our role in it to try to find any possible amicable solution.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 25 May 2005

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Maldives

1. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If he will make a statement on the progress of reconstruction in the Maldives following the tsunami. [701]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): The tsunami killed 82 people and made homeless almost 30,000 as well as causing considerable and widespread damage to the infrastructure and essential services in the Maldives.

The Government of the Maldives have launched, and are making good progress with, a national recovery and reconstruction plan designed to rebuild infrastructure and restore livelihoods.

Tim Loughton: The Minister will know of my frustration that the Friends of Maldives charity based in my constituency, which, amazingly, collected 100 tonnes of urgent medical, food and other aid for the Maldives, was unable to get any assistance whatever from his Department, from any Government agency or from the Disasters Emergency Committee in transporting that aid to the Maldives. Will he now acknowledge the recent report backed by the World Bank that said that foreign financing received or pledged so far for the Maldives falls far short of the estimated reconstruction needs? Given the enormous and devastating impact of the tsunami on those small and vulnerable islands, will he ensure that they receive their fair share of reconstruction aid, because attention has focused on the immediate disaster area in Indonesia and Sri Lanka?

Mr. Thomas: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to acknowledge that, despite the difficulties that the charity based in his constituency has had in getting the aid that it collected to the Maldives, the reconstruction effort there is going well. He will be pleased to hear that all children in the islands are back in school following the considerable efforts of the Government of the Maldives, supported by the international community, that there have been no outbreaks of disease and that house construction and repair programmes have restarted. I accept, however, that the international community has to do more to support the Maldives. We are continuing to press the European Community to make more funding available for the Maldives, and we will also be talking to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank about what else they can do in those islands.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The cost to the Maldives of this dreadful disaster approaches $500 million, which is about two thirds of the country's gross domestic product. Does the Minister agree that, despite the horrific nature of the disaster, recovery provides an opportunity to build back rather better and address some of the development challenges that have long faced these communities? What is he doing in that regard?

Mr. Thomas: My hon. Friend is right. As well as the Maldives being severely affected, many other countries in the Indian ocean were heavily affected by the tsunami. It does provide an opportunity, as part of the reconstruction programme, to build back better. We are working closely with the European Community, which has a large reconstruction effort in the Maldives and, as I said in answer to the previous question, we are also in discussions with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank about their efforts in the Maldives.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the prosperous tourism industry in the Maldives has recovered well, but that in other parts of the country the political situation is unstable and unsatisfactory. He will also know that the Friends of Maldives in Salisbury—there are many different groups with that name—have found it impossible to get distributed the goods and money that they have collected, and the Government there have said that the leaders of that organisation are excluded from the Maldives. Will he see whether he can break the logjam, so that the money and goods collected in Salisbury can get through to their intended recipients?

Mr. Thomas: I will have another look at what we can do to help with the problem that the hon. Gentleman identified and will write to him. That is probably the best way to leave it for now.

Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is right to highlight the problems in the Maldives. The damage amounts to $470 million, equivalent to 62 per cent. of the country's GDP. As the Asian Development Bank has reported, there has been a shortfall of $4 billion in money promised for rebuilding the Maldives, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. How is that shortfall to be addressed? What progress has the UK made in honouring its own commitments and what progress is being made in developing an early warning system to ensure the minimisation of loss of life in future?

Mr. Thomas: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post. There has already been considerable discussion about setting up an early warning system, for

which some $8 million has been pledged. The role that the UK can play is in making sure that the information secured from such an early warning system gets to the very people most at risk of being affected by a tsunami or some other disaster.

On the wider reconstruction effort, we are speaking almost daily to other parts of the international community, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the European Community, which are making substantial funding available for the reconstruction effort. In addition, I hope to go to the region shortly to see for myself how the effort is going on the ground.

Tuberculosis

2. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West) (Con): What action his Department is taking to assist in stemming the spread of tuberculosis in the developing world. [702]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): We support TB control through, for example, our support to the global Stop TB partnership, the World Health Organisation and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Since January 2002, the global fund has approved some $488 million in grants for TB control and $102 million for tackling HIV/TB co-infection. We also support TB control work directly in a number of countries, including Malawi, India, Nepal and China, and indirectly through our work to support the strengthening of health systems.

Mr. Amess: I know that the Minister shares my dismay at the increasing prevalence of TB in Africa and that he believes that our efforts to tackle HIV and AIDS should be closely integrated to tackle that common coincident disease. On 7 April, the Secretary of State suggested that non-governmental organisations and academics would be consulted. What stage has that consultation reached, with whom is the right hon. Gentleman consulting and can the Minister announce any specific action that the Government intend to take at this stage?

Mr. Thomas: I agree that we need to do more to tackle TB and AIDS/TB co-infection. The consultation ends on 16 June, so there is still time for the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members to submit their views on what else they think we should do in TB control.

It is clear that the international community has to do much more. In that context, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes yesterday's historic deal within the European Union to increase substantially the amount of money for international development assistance. He is well known for his pro-European views, so I am sure that he will pay tribute, not only to my right hon. Friends for their success in negotiating the deal, but to the Commission and our European allies for the part that they played in securing it.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the excellent coverage in today's *Daily Record* of the visit to Malawi by Jack McConnell, the Scottish First Minister, underlines the importance to such countries of tackling tuberculosis and of the EU's achieving the millennium goals?

Mr. Thomas: I apologise to my right hon. Friend for not having yet read the *Daily Record* coverage—I assure the House that I shall do so straight after questions. Despite that, I welcome Jack McConnell's visit to Malawi and hope that he will have the opportunity to see and hear about the programme of additional help to the health sector in Malawi that we are providing. Our aim is to double the number of nurses and treble the number of doctors in that country by improving their pay and conditions.

Fair Trade

3. **Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to seek the removal of trade restrictions on goods exported by developing countries. [703]

4. **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole) (Con): What measures the Government are taking to promote trade between the EU and developing countries. [704]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Hilary Benn): Through our G8 and EU presidencies, the Government are pushing for real progress in the World Trade Organisation round. Richer countries need to open their markets further, cut unfair subsidies and remove non-tariff barriers to trade, but market access is not enough: poorer countries also need additional aid, including help to build their capacity to trade. Yesterday's agreement by the EU to a new official development assistance target of 0.56 per cent. of gross national income by 2010, and 0.7 per cent. by 2015, with at least half the additional aid for Africa, was therefore very significant.

Andrew Mackay: Does the Secretary of State not think it a tragedy that so many exports from the developing world are being thwarted by wholly unfair trade barriers in both the United States of America and the European Union? Far too little is being done to change the situation. How will he ensure that those barriers are quickly broken down?

Hilary Benn: I agree completely—it is a tragedy. Such barriers are probably the single biggest obstacle to developing countries' efforts to improve the lives of their people. Earning and trading their way out of poverty is the route to improving people's lives. The framework agreement was reached at the end of July last year and we need the draft agreements to be in place by this summer. The priorities are clear: to end export subsidies—the Government are pressing for that to be done by 2010—and to improve market access. In addition, we must give developing countries time to adjust: not all can adapt to a more open and fairer trading system at the same pace.

Mr. Syms: The World Bank has estimated that both rich and poor would benefit by billions in global income if trade barriers were to come down, so I welcome what the Minister has said. Should not the United Kingdom,

as a member of the EU, be pushing both for reforms within the common agricultural policy, which has been devastating in the third world, and reform of the terms of the "Everything but Arms" agreement so that trade barriers fall and we can get free and fair trade with the developing world, and we all benefit?

Hilary Benn: Indeed, we do need to do that. Pressing for reform of the CAP is something that the Government have been doing under both parties for a long time. That is why we have argued for getting rid of export subsidies, which would probably be the single most important step, and we have set a date. That is the argument that we will take into the discussions in the EU. The "Everything but Arms" initiative was an important step forward. We want the opportunity that it has opened up for the least developed countries to be made more widely available as part of an agreement in Hong Kong.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): I welcome the announcement yesterday by the EU of substantial increases in aid. Can my right hon. Friend indicate when those countries that have not yet set a timetable, such as Italy and Germany, intend to fulfil that commitment?

Hilary Benn: Germany has set a timetable. My colleague, the German Development Minister, signed on the dotted line at an Oxfam event yesterday morning in Brussels for the date of 2014. That demonstrates that, with an increasing number of countries agreeing to set timetables, the momentum of support in providing more aid, better aid, debt relief and fairer trade opportunities is now growing. It puts us in a good position to go to the G8 summit at Gleneagles. Europe, which provides about 55 per cent. of global aid, is sending a clear message that I hope will be heard throughout the world.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, welcome the announcement yesterday by the EU in Dublin of aid to developing countries. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that that will not preclude added efforts to set up an international finance facility that, in the long run, will offer enormous scope to developing countries?

Hilary Benn: I am happy to offer my hon. Friend that reassurance. The international finance facility will be in addition to the commitments that EU member states entered into yesterday in Brussels. As my hon. Friend will know, we are pressing, first, for the pilot IFF scheme for immunisation and vaccination. We now have support not only from France but also from Sweden, and since the House last met, from Spain. That shows that states recognise that, as well as moving towards the 0.7 per cent. objective and achieving it by the dates that an increasing number of countries have set, we need to find ways of raising additional finance now, in this instance to save children's lives by vaccinating and immunising.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that he and the Prime Minister have the full support of Members across the Chamber of all political parties for the noble aims that he has set out for the G8 summit and for the successful conclusion of the discussions yesterday in Brussels? Will he urge the Prime Minister to draw down some of the political capital that he has stored up with the American Administration and the White House to ensure that these important proposals are vigorously pursued and implemented single-mindedly?

Hilary Benn: I offer a warm and sincere welcome to the hon. Gentleman on taking up his new position. I look forward to working with him in this most rewarding of policy responsibilities.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about what we have achieved so far. As he will be aware, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is about to set off on a series of visits to talk to G8 colleagues. The agreement that we reached yesterday, which sent a clear message on behalf of the rich countries of Europe, will help in the discussions that take place. When we reach Gleneagles, the choice facing every country—the United States of America, Japan and Canada, for example—will simply be whether we do what we know needs to be done this year really to make a difference to the lives of billions of our fellow human beings.

Mr. Mitchell: Can the Secretary of State confirm that the value of direct EU export subsidies for agricultural goods sold to Africa over the past five years is well in excess of £15 billion? Are not those immoral export subsidies an engine of impoverishment for the developing countries of Africa as well as a total waste of European taxpayers' money?

Hilary Benn: They are indeed both those things. That is why we want to see an end to export subsidies and why we are arguing in the European Community for that end date to be 2010.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Further to the questions from the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Andrew Mackay) and the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), can my right hon. Friend cast any light on the widespread reports last week that Mr. Peter Carl, an EU trade official, and Mr. Peter Mandelson are seeking to overturn the British Government's position on economic partnership agreements so as to prise open the markets of the developing world, whereas the Government's position is that they should have help to liberalise them at a sane and acceptable pace?

Hilary Benn: I read the story in *The Guardian* reporting the comments attributed to the Commission official to whom my hon. Friend refers. What the official wrote in that letter was wrong both about our policy and our motivation. We are clear that economic partnership agreements must be used to promote development. We are committed to that, which is why we have set out the policy that we have. It is a policy that we intend to pursue vigorously.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): I welcome yesterday's announcement. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Make Poverty History campaign that African, Caribbean and Pacific countries must have the right to decide what to liberalise and when, and that they should

be given the choice whether to sign up to economic partnership agreements or to another pro-development alternative?

Hilary Benn: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position and extend the same hope that we can work together on this important area. Yes, I agree with him. In the end, it is for ACP countries to decide whether they wish to sign up to economic partnership agreements. They can have confidence about the choice that they will face if they see that there are alternatives if they do not like the deal on the table. From my conversations with Trade Ministers in developing countries, I know that they are clear that all is to play for on these agreements. They know what they want and I am sure that they will use their bargaining power to achieve it.

Nigeria

5. **John Robertson** (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): What his assessment is of the humanitarian situation in *(a)* Nigeria and *(b)* the Niger Delta; and if he will make a statement. [705]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Hilary Benn): After 40 years of military dictatorship, mismanagement, and corruption, Nigeria's human development indicators are among the worst in the world. The situation in the Niger delta, although bad, is better than in most other parts of the country. Nigeria is now making some real progress and this is the best opportunity for reform in a generation. Last week, I visited Nigeria for talks with President Obasanjo, and announced a further £19 million in aid to improve the effectiveness of the federal Government. This is part of a trebling of UK aid to Nigeria from £35 million in 2003–04 to £100 million in 2007–08.

John Robertson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that extensive answer and for going to the Niger delta to see the situation. What work is he doing with the non-governmental organisations on the ground and with other Government Departments to ensure that there is stability in the Niger delta?

Hilary Benn: Principally, we are working with the Government of Nigeria to support the reform process. One example is that the Nigerians are now supporting the extractive industries' transparency initiative, which aims to ensure that the natural resource which is of such benefit to Nigeria—oil—is used in a transparent and open way and does not fuel the corruption that is such a problem in the Niger delta. We are not working in the Niger delta states because they receive 30 per cent. of the total revenue allocated to states in Nigeria, but they contain only 13 per cent. of the population. That is why I said that, relatively speaking, they are better off. But tackling corruption, improving security and reforming the way in which the public administration works will help to deal with the problems that that part of Nigeria faces.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I am sure my right hon. Friend will recognise the work done by our former colleague, Bill Tynan in setting up the Niger delta group, and also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson), who has volunteered to keep that going. Is not one of the problems in Nigeria that, because of cheap oil, 75 per cent. of the gas coming out of the oilfields in Nigeria is still flared when that resource could be used for the people of Nigeria and their economy? With the technical expertise that we have, can we not help the Nigerian Government to harness that gas and bring it to the mainland to be used for economic benefits?

Hilary Benn: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to our hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) and our former colleague, Bill Tynan, who have played a part in the all-party group. I am sure that this is an issue that both the oil companies and the Nigerian Government will happily consider if they can find a way of making it work. Despite the fact that Nigeria has a lot of oil, its GDP per head is still only $350 because it is a very populous country, and therefore sometimes people have a misinformed impression about how well-off Nigeria is. It is very poor, and that is why we are increasing our aid programme. It is also why we are backing the calls for debt relief from Nigeria, and that will be very important in helping the country to progress.

AIDS Orphans

6. **Alistair Burt** (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the situation of AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. [707]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Hilary Benn): According to UN statistics, more than 14 million children under 15 have lost parents to AIDS in Africa. Those orphans are more likely than other children to go hungry, miss school and lack the basic needs such as clothing and shelter. Sixteen African countries have now developed national plans to tackle the problem and the UK has committed to spending £123 million over three years to help AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in the sub-continent.

Alistair Burt: I commend to the Secretary of State the report recently published by World Vision, looking in particular at four sub-Saharan African countries, which confirmed the sad conclusions that he read out in relation to those orphans' access to education, health care and their basic needs. That is contrary to national and international commitments to them already entered into. In encouraging others to ensure that those commitments are given a higher priority, will he please look in particular at the need for research into children's antiretroviral formulas, because the absence of that treatment for children is making their distressed condition even more vulnerable?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman makes an important suggestion that I undertake to look into and to write to him on. More broadly, part of the funding that we are making available will go to help pay the school fees of AIDS orphans who would not otherwise be able to afford to go to school, help with feeding at school and providing the needs of life, such as bedding.

somewhere to sleep and someone to care for them. When we consulted on our AIDS plan, one point that came back strongly was that we need to do more to support orphans, and out of that, from the £1.5 billion commitment that we have made over the next three years, we have earmarked this sum to work specifically with AIDS orphans and to support the countries that are increasingly developing policies to provide practical help on the ground.

Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that women in sub-Saharan Africa do not have equality of access to antiretroviral therapies. What is his Department doing to ensure equity and equality of access in order to reduce maternal and child mortality and the number of AIDS orphans?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are doing that, first by supporting the development of health services in Africa so that they are better able to provide for the needs of all; secondly, by saying very clearly that—to refer to the point made by the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt)—the needs of women and children should be taken into account, so that it is not just men who have access to the treatment; and, thirdly, by funding ground-breaking research, such as that being done into microbicides, which, if successful, would provide women with a chance to protect themselves from HIV.

Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that, AIDS being one of the major problems confronting the continent of Africa, a more strategic approach is needed to the way in which we help those countries. Can he give us an update on the progress in establishing the Commission for Africa?

Hilary Benn: The Commission for Africa has reported and it has provided the background, along with a number of other initiatives that have been taken, to the political choice that we face as a world this year as to whether we will do what we know needs to be done to make a difference. That is why yesterday's agreement in Brussels was so significant. Here we have a clear message from a group of very rich countries that it is prepared to put more resources into aid. It is why we need a debt relief deal, why we need the international finance facility and why we need a more open and fairer trading system. The momentum is building, but the real test will be what happens in the G8 and at the millennium summit later this year.

Debt Relief

7. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): What debt relief arrangements have been agreed with *(a)* Sri Lanka and *(b)* other Asian countries consequent upon the tsunami disaster. [708]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): Sri Lanka will be included in the UK's multilateral debt relief initiative. We will pay 10 per cent. of Sri Lanka's repayments to the World Bank's concessional lending arm for the next 10 years. The Paris Club group of Government creditors has also offered Indonesia and Sri Lanka a one-year moratorium on repayments on their bilateral debts.

Dr. Cable: Will the Minister clarify exactly what the Government mean by debt relief? Since I challenged the Chancellor on that matter a few weeks ago, the Sri Lankan authorities have reconfirmed that what they are being offered is not debt relief but debt postponement, and that interest is not being written off but merely capitalised. Will the Minister please clarify that point?

Mr. Thomas: As I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would know, we have offered to service 100 per cent. of the debt involved. We have already had a number of discussions with the Sri Lankan authorities. As I indicated earlier, I hope to visit Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and we will have further discussions with the authorities about that issue.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [716] **Mr. John Greenway** (Ryedale) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 May.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today. Here is something that perhaps I, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the whole House can agree on: that we wish Liverpool the best of luck in tonight's Champions League final.

Mr. Greenway: What message does the Prime Minister think that his eve-of-poll flying visit to Scarborough gave to voters, who then sensibly elected my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill)? Was the Prime Minister not advised that his journey by helicopter would be seen in sharp contrast to the everyday misery for motorists of long delays and traffic jams on the A64, which was the biggest local issue in the election? When will his Government give the people of Ryedale and Scarborough a road fit for the 21st century?

The Prime Minister: First, I would remind the hon. Gentleman that as opposed to the 356 MPs that we have on this side of the House, he has 197 on his side. Secondly, whatever the answers to Britain's transport problems, cutting the transport budget, which was at least the policy of the Opposition before the election, is certainly not one of them.

Patrick Hall (Bedford) (Lab): Last week, I attended an auction of promises organised by students at Biddenham school in Bedford to raise funds for the "hope house" orphanage at Bloemfontein, in South Africa. I was lucky enough to bid for the mystery prize, which later turned out to be a pen donated by the Prime Minister, with his name inscribed on it. It will obviously

be a collector's item at some point in the future. *[Interruption.]* I thank my right hon. Friend for supporting that initiative and for making Africa a priority. May I ask that while we—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: I think that the hon. Gentleman is near the end of his question, so let him finish.

Patrick Hall: Does my right hon. Friend agree that while we rightly condemn some young people for antisocial behaviour, we should not forget that there are thousands who do good work—like the people of Biddenham—because they care about this world?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. It is not just young people but the whole of this country who are committed to the changes that we want to make in favour of Africa. Such changes include not just increasing our aid—under this Government, aid to Africa has trebled—but making sure that we put together a proper and comprehensive plan for Africa that gives that continent, which is the only continent that has gone backwards, not forwards, over the last 30 years, some hope for the future. If we can get some support for our proposals, I believe that we will provide such hope.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I take particular pleasure in joining the Prime Minister in wishing Liverpool every bit of good luck tonight.

A teacher is assaulted every seven minutes in our schools, so the Prime Minister was quite right to say that school discipline would be a priority for his new term. Is not the obvious way to deal with that to give head teachers the final say over expulsions from their schools?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, we have asked a head teacher to head up a panel of people who will report to us by, I think, December, and we will follow their recommendations very closely. We have an appeals committee because it was set up under the previous Government, and the reason for it is to try to avoid ending up instead with needless court cases. Only a very small percentage of pupils excluded from school—such exclusions are actually down somewhat over the past few years—go back into that school following agreement reached on appeal. But, I think it important that we look not just at school exclusions and appeals, but at the whole range of measures that are necessary to give teachers and head teachers the clear understanding that they should be in charge of the class.

Mr. Howard: The Prime Minister knows that appeals panels do not offer immunity from legal challenge, and he also knows how much anguish appeals can cause—every time he tries to sack a Minister, they appeal to the Chancellor, who promptly reinstates them. *[Laughter.]* In 20 per cent. of appeals, the head teacher is overruled. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Education Secretary got it completely wrong when she said on the "Today" programme on 20 May that that figure was "a printing error"?

The Prime Minister: There are two different figures: the percentage of pupils who, having been excluded, are let back into school is 2 per cent., and the percentage who succeed on appeal is 20 per cent. The previous Government introduced an appeals system because schools, quite apart from local education authorities, were worried about law cases involving them or local education authorities. Every single aspect of the issue will be examined by the panel appointed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, and we will study its recommendations carefully.

I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition agrees with me about the importance of parents backing up teachers when teachers discipline their children. When we were growing up, if children got told off at school, then they were likely to get told off at home, and it is time that we returned to that.

Mr. Howard: I agree with that, but the problem is that the Prime Minister has been talking about the issue for years. His 1997 manifesto said:

"Teachers will be entitled to positive support . . . to promote . . . sound discipline."

His 2001 manifesto said something almost identical to that. Were they printing errors too?

The Prime Minister: No. In fairness, the previous Government introduced the concept of appeals. We have changed the nature of appeals, so that head teachers now sit on the panel, which means that there is a far greater chance that the decision of a head teacher who excludes a pupil will be upheld. We have, if anything, tightened the system, but, as I have said, we are prepared to take a further look at the matter.

We must tackle other issues in addition to excluded pupils. This Government have doubled the number of places in pupil referral units for pupils who have been permanently excluded. We must also examine what happens to pupils who are temporarily excluded, because they do not get proper teaching outside the classroom at the moment. We must examine the idea of establishing units within schools where pupils who misbehave are sent. We must look at a range of issues rather than just examining appeals, which we will look at, too.

Mr. Howard: The Prime Minister has had eight years to look at those things. People do not want him to spend more time looking at those things—they want action.

Let us turn to another of the Prime Minister's priorities for his new term—tackling antisocial behaviour. Last week, the Minister for Policing, Security and Community Safety said that offenders on community service should be "identified". The Leader of the House then claimed that she was just "thinking aloud". However, the Home Secretary promptly backed her up, saying that putting offenders in orange uniforms is

"not only a goer. It's happening now . . . in many parts of the country."

So what is the policy? Is it a goer or not?

Hon. Members: You are!

The Prime Minister: That is most unkind.

Schemes already exist to identify people who have committed offences or antisocial behaviour, but, again, that policy is part of a far bigger picture. The same is true of schools, on which it is worth pointing out that school discipline is an issue, but it is not the only issue. Investment in schools and increasing numbers of teachers and classroom assistants are also important issues, and we have been tackling them over the past eight years. On antisocial behaviour, when we introduce fresh legislation in addition to our previous legislation, which has had a real impact on antisocial behaviour in communities, I hope that we will get the Conservative party's wholehearted support in this House and in the other place.

Mr. Howard: If that legislation is sensible, of course we will support it. But I asked the Prime Minister a specific question: is the idea of offenders in orange uniforms Government policy or not? The Home Secretary said that he visited a scheme

"where people on community service wearing uniform were doing the whole place up",

but the person responsible for the scheme said that they were just wearing disposable blue uniforms bought at a local DIY store to protect their clothes from paint. The Prime Minister's official spokesman described all this as

"part of a continuum of ministerial thinking"—

just like marching yobs to cashpoints, docking housing benefit from problem families and giving record tokens to youngsters to encourage them to behave. Is it not a pity that when there is recognition on both sides of the House that antisocial behaviour is a serious problem— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Cawsey, you must not shout.

Mr. Howard: All we get, apart from antisocial behaviour in this House, is Government by gimmick, knee-jerk policies for long-term problems, and Ministers who just make it up as they go along.

The Prime Minister: First, on antisocial behaviour and fixed penalty notices, let me remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that in the region of 90,000 fixed penalty notices, nearly 4,000 antisocial behaviour orders, almost 9,000 curfew orders, almost 200 crack house closure orders and almost 500 dispersal orders have been issued. Antisocial behaviour legislation, which has been applied by record numbers of police, is working because we have increased the numbers of police. The right hon. and learned Gentleman will remember that when he was Home Secretary he actually cut the numbers of police.

As for crime overall, let me quote from the Association of Chief Police Officers:

"The British Crime Survey shows that crime has reduced over the last ten years and that violent crime has remained stable . . . We feel it is important that all crime statistics, which forces publish regularly, should be put into context and communicated in a responsible way to the public".

That was a from press release entitled, "The Conservative Party Local Press Adverts on Violent Crime". If it comes to a discussion on crime, I prefer the words of ACPO to those of the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Yes, crime is a major issue. We continue to deal with it, and we will bring forward fresh legislation. I repeat that I hope that all parties in this House—including, incidentally, the Liberal Democrats—and in the other place realise that the public want extra numbers of police, they want community support officers, and they want antisocial behaviour legislation. Under this Government they will get it, and they should also get the full support of both Houses of Parliament.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): What can my right hon. Friend do to help people like Gavin Fisher, a young man from Mitcham whose identity has been stolen? On more than one occasion his parents have been sent frantic by calls from the police to say that he has been arrested, only to go to the police station to find that it is not him. He receives threatening letters and court summonses from train companies on whose trains he has never travelled; Thameslink says that there is nothing that it can do. How can my right hon. Friend help my constituent and his desperate parents?

The Prime Minister: We will be introducing some measure of help later today. It is important to emphasise that the abuse of identity costs this country billions of pounds a year. We have the new biometric technology. We have, in any event, to move to new biometric passports as a result of other changes happening around the world. This is an important moment where we decide that we will legislate so that we can enable identity cards to be taken forward. I look forward to the support of my hon. Friend on that issue, and perhaps even the support of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who used to be, at any rate, a great advocate of identity cards.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree with Adair Turner, who described the Government's current pensions system as "a complete muddle" and went on to say that the current reliance on means-testing is "not sustainable"? Does that not, coming from him, demonstrate the need for genuine urgency to sort out the mess?

The Prime Minister: That is not what Adair Turner says in his interim report, but the very reason we set up the commission was to try to deal with the long-term pensions issues, and it is important that we do that. If, when the right hon. Gentleman refers to means-tested benefits, he means the pension credit, let me point out to him that about 2 million pensioners in this country have been lifted out of acute hardship. They could not have been lifted out of that poverty but for the pension credit.

Mr. Kennedy: If the Prime Minister and the Government are serious—I believe that they are—about trying to establish an all-party consensus on long-term pensions reform, surely he will acknowledge that there first needs to be consensus in the Government on means-testing. Last weekend, the Chancellor implied that pensions reform could be postponed into the next Parliament. Does the Prime Minister intend to have a pensions consensus established while he is still in tenure?

The Prime Minister: We shall do our best to establish a consensus on the subject, but it must be on the basis of

making difficult decisions—not something that the Liberal Democrats are famed for—to ensure that whatever system we introduce is fair and can be paid for. The reason why, over the past few years, we have tried to give more money to the poorest pensioners is that, when we came to office, many pensioners faced a choice each winter literally between the money that they needed to heat their flat or home and the money that they needed in order to eat. A lot of that problem—not all of it—has been mitigated by the pension credit. Of course long-term factors have to be carefully considered, but I am proud of this Government's record on pensioners, and particularly proud that we focused first on those who are the poorest in our society.

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that we are about to enter the last lap of the long and somewhat tortuous decision-making process to decide the host city for the 2012 Olympics. He will also be aware that the worlds of politics and sport deny that the Government of any country should have a telling influence on the process, but he will recognise that that is not always the reality. Will he indicate to the House what the Government intend to do over the next six weeks to back the London bid?

The Prime Minister: As I said when I addressed an event to commemorate the centenary of the British Olympic Association the other day, we will give the bid every support. We have already been doing that and, as a result of work across Government, the London 2012 bid is probably the best bid—certainly the best technical bid—in the field. That is a result not only of the excellent work done by Lord Coe and his team, but of the work done across Government. I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to push that as much as we possibly can. The whole country is behind the bid—I know that all political parties are—and I think that the British public are enthusiastic about the prospect of the Olympic games being hosted in London.

Q2. [717] **Mr. Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): A 1999 EU directive designates pet cemeteries as landfill, and that includes Pets at Rest on the Isle of Wight, where only four or five animals are buried a year. That offensive classification incurs an inspection fee of £2,600, which will put Pets at Rest out of business. The Labour party's manifesto promised to bear down on European regulation. Why did the Government introduce the regulation in the first place and what will the Prime Minister do to keep Pets at Rest in business?

The Prime Minister: The answer is, I do not know. I will have to get back to the hon. Gentleman on that.

Written Constitution

Q3. [718] **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): One the Prime Minister might know: will he bring forward proposals for a written constitution incorporating the rights and responsibilities of individuals and political institutions?

The Prime Minister: No. The UK has been well served by its existing uncodified constitution, which has evolved to meet changing circumstances.

Mr. Allen: Over recent decades, under all parties, government has got stronger and more centralised. Our other political institutions—local government, political parties and, above all, the House of Commons—have become weaker and more dependent. Does the Prime Minister recognise that growing and unhealthy imbalance, and does he accept that an agreed, written partnership between Parliament and the British people might be one way forward, leading not only to a rejuvenation of our democracy, but to better government?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned on this issue for a very long time and written extensively on it. His point about the need to ensure that Parliament holds the Executive to account is absolutely right. I do not, however, think that the answer is to be found in a written constitution. I have to tell him that frankly. The answer, if there is an easy answer, is to be found in the way in which Parliament is reported and, in particular, in ensuring that when people are speaking in Parliament—not simply at Prime Minister's questions but in the many debates that take place in a somewhat less crowded House—sufficient attention is paid. When people think that sufficient attention is being paid in those circumstances, they will find that there is a slightly different balance between the Executive and Parliament.

Engagements

Q4. [719] **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): Many people in my constituency asked me during the election campaign whether, in the event of the rejection of the European Union constitution treaty in a referendum in any member state of the European Union, the treaty would be dead and buried. The French Prime Minister has apparently indicated to the French people that that would be the case. Will the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom give me an assurance that, in the event of such a rejection by any country, including the United Kingdom, there would be no immaculate resurrection of that treaty in any circumstances?

The Prime Minister: No. What I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that, before any constitutional treaty is ratified by the UK, there will be a referendum on it. If any country were to vote no—so far, no country has done so, and we should not speculate too much about what might happen in the next few days—there would have to be a discussion in the European Council to decide on the way forward. There is really nothing else to say at this point in time.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down) (SDLP): Does the Prime Minister accept that the methods used by the Government over the past couple of years to resolve the political crisis in Northern Ireland have played a substantive part in getting us to where we are now, in terms of placing the community under the dictates of the IRA army council and the extremes of Unionism and

republicanism? Furthermore, is he aware of the tremendous downfall in public confidence in the provision of health and educational facilities in Northern Ireland? In these circumstances, how can he justify the appointment of the first part-time Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, however worthy and able that right hon. Gentleman might be?

The Prime Minister: That is a little unfair to my right hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), to be frank. He is obviously devoting his time to Northern Ireland, as are his Ministers. I do not think that the problem in Northern Ireland is the one that my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) describes. The fact is that there are only two ways forward. One is inclusive of Sinn Fein, and for that to happen, there has to be a complete end to all forms of paramilitary or criminal activity, as the Good Friday agreement indicates. Alternatively, there is a way forward without Sinn Fein, which would depend on my hon. Friend's party. Those are the only two ways forward, I am afraid. I can only facilitate; I cannot actually order parties to do anything. My own view is that it would be far better to [illegible] an inclusive way forward, and I continue to think [illegible] but that cannot be done on any other basis than the proper implementation of the Good Friday agreement, which involves the cessation of all forms of activity contrary to law.

Q5. [720] **Mark Simmonds** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The UK's fiscal position has deteriorated dramatically from a 1.2 per cent. surplus in 1999 to a 3.4 per cent. deficit in 2004. It is the responsibility of any sensible Government to attempt to reduce such a deficit. How is the Prime Minister going to do that?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to do it by taking the advice of the Conservative party, that is for sure. It would mean cuts in front-line services, and I simply do not agree with that.

If we compare this Government's fiscal record with that of the last Government, the comparison looks extremely good for this Government. The fact is that we have a strong economy: we have probably had the strongest economy in the G7 over the past few years. We have high levels of growth, low levels of unemployment, low mortgage rates and low inflation. The hon. Gentleman should compare and contrast. I know that he was not a member of the Government, or even a Member of Parliament, at the time of the last Conservative Administration, but if he casts his mind back to that time he will remember the 10 per cent. interest rates for four years, the 3 million unemployed and the two recessions. That is one reason why he is sitting over there and not over here.

Q6. [721] **Paul Farrelly** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Obviously we all welcomed the Prime Minister's efforts with the aid package for MG Rover at Longbridge. Leoni Wiring, which was once the biggest employer in my constituency, has been decimated by Rover's demise. Because of that and other manufacturing job losses, areas such as north Staffordshire are in urgent need of regeneration. Can the Prime Minister reassure me that no regeneration projects in Staffordshire or the rest of the west midlands will suffer because of the priority given to the MG Rover package—particularly in respect of the allocation of European funds—and that all our regeneration projects in the west midlands will be treated and appraised with the same priority as before?

The Prime Minister: I totally understand my hon. Friend's concern. I assure him that the recent decision that I gather was made by the west midlands programme monitoring committee to devote additional appraisal resources to the current MG Rover situation should not and will not have an adverse impact on other projects in the region. A number of those projects still await either planning permission or confirmation of their match funding and therefore are not ready to proceed to a full offer of European grant, but I assure my hon. Friend that as soon as they are ready to go ahead with the relevant funds and planning approvals in place, they will do so.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): In view of the publication of the report of the Independent Monitoring Commission yesterday, which exposed once again the deep and continuing involvement of the Provisional IRA and others in paramilitarism and all forms of criminality, can the Prime Minister make it absolutely clear that there will be no question of having terrorists, or their front men or apologists, in the Government of any part of the United Kingdom?

I welcomed the Prime Minister's remarks about finding a way forward without Sinn Fein. May I urge him to take on board the election results that showed clearly that that is the overwhelming desire of all democratic and peace-loving people in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: As I said a moment ago, we have not been able to reconstitute the Executive in Northern Ireland precisely because it has to be absolutely clear that there must be an end to all forms of unlawful, illegal activity, paramilitary or otherwise. That is clear. That is the reason for the impasse.

As for the hon. Gentleman's second point, I know he will accept and understand that that depends not on the views of the Unionist community but on the views of the nationalist and republican community. What we must do is bring the situation to a point at which either it is clear that there cannot and will not ever be a resolution of the problem in respect of the republican movement, or the problem is resolved—and it can be resolved in only one way. If the republicans want to get into government, there must be an end to all of it. That is the whole basis of the Good Friday agreement.

As I said a moment ago, I can only tell people what the situation is. It is for them to make their decision: for the republicans, for the hon. Gentleman, for the SDLP and others. The one benefit of the peace process over the past eight years has been that it is now crystal clear what is the issue and how it is to be resolved. The only question is whether it can be resolved.

Q7. [722] **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): A recent Department for Transport safety poster depicts a child saying

"Hit at 40 mph there's a 80 per cent. chance I'll die, hit at 30 mph there's a 80 per cent. chance I'll live."

Why, then, do the Government propose to reduce the penalties for breaking the 30 mph speed limit?

The Prime Minister: My understanding is that the current proposals are to double the maximum points and increase the fines for the worst speeding offences. We have purposely not suggested reducing the points or fines for people who speed in the lowest zones, the 20 mph zones.

Obviously this must be considered carefully as the road safety Bill proceeds, but it is worth pointing out that some 10,000 fewer people are killed and seriously injured on our roads each year than was the case between 1994 and 1998. The challenge now is for us to increase that by the same amount by 2010. I understand my hon. Friend's points and I am sure that they will be considered carefully as the Bill proceeds, but the whole purpose of the Bill is to introduce common sense to the system and to protect, in particular, our children from serious injury or death.

Q8. [723] **Mr. Andrew Tyrie** (Chichester) (Con): Are the treaty terms under which the UK receives its rebate from the EU budget non-negotiable—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: We have made it absolutely clear that the rebate remains. It remained in 1999. We negotiated successfully then. We will negotiate successfully again.

Points of Order

12.30 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Did you receive an explanation today as to why the amendment in my name and that of my hon. Friends to the motion on the Queen's Speech did not appear on the Order Paper? Can you confirm that it was properly presented and presented on time?

Mr. Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. In this morning's Order Paper, there was an error regarding the motion for an address. The amendment to it in the name of the leader of the Scottish National party, which appeared yesterday, was not reprinted. A corrected version of item 3 on today's Order Paper has been placed in the Vote Office.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You and I have been in the House a considerable time. We both enjoy a robust debate in the House but every Member deserves to be heard in the House. Although there is a fair level of activity in any debate, which we all understand, when an orchestrated group tries to stop a Member in the House from being heard, that is a serious concern. Towards the end of last evening, there was a clear, organised attempt—we used to call it talking among ourselves—to disrupt speeches. We always have to speak in polite terms, but now that we have gone back to silly hours on Tuesday nights, there is a great temptation for Members here to enjoy a good dinner. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] The mixture last night—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is not really a point of order. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that I have noticed at times that he interrupts speeches, and I have had a bit of judicious deafness in that respect. He has given me an opportunity to say that it is good manners to listen to Members at all times. If Members want to enter into private conversations, they should go outside the Chamber. I have put that on the record as much as any Speaker.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: I have dealt with the point of order. I do not want to hear any more about it.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As recently as last week you urged Ministers to make their announcements to the House rather than to the media. Over the weekend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Deputy Prime Minister heavily trailed their plans for shared home ownership, and a press release today from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister precedes a written ministerial statement referring to documents that are not available in the House of Commons Library. I have just checked. Does not that show complete contempt for the House and will you support my efforts to get that issue, which was originally our policy, properly debated?

Mr. Speaker: I understand that there has been a written statement. Let me clarify my position. It is bringing information to the House that is important. Let me say to the hon. Lady, who is a member of Her Majesty's Opposition, that I will, of course, always consider urgent questions. If things have been said in the media, perhaps over the weekend, that does give me a feeling that the Minister concerned must come to the House. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Lady.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. During International Development questions today and, to a certain extent, during Prime Minister's questions, it was impossible in certain parts of the House to hear the debate. It was not so much because of the normal ambient noise, no matter how much we may not like that ambient noise, as because some of the speakers were not working and the amplification system is faulty. It was faulty yesterday, too. May I ask that perhaps over this coming week it be looked at and repaired?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has a valid point. Just before I left to come to the Chamber the Serjeant at Arms told me that work would take place over the weekend, and perhaps the recess if necessary.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): Further to the point of order made by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), Mr. Speaker, you were robust in the last Parliament and said that if there were a ministerial announcement, it should be made here first, with the press statement coming later. The hon. Lady said that things had been done in the wrong order today, and it would be helpful if you confirmed your statement of the last Parliament.

Mr. Speaker: In this Parliament, before the House was kind enough to re-elect me, I confirmed my position—and I stand by that.

BILLS PRESENTED

IDENTITY CARDS

Mr. Secretary Clarke, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Secretary Margaret Beckett and Mr. Tony McNulty, presented a Bill to make provision for a national scheme of registration of individuals and for the issue of cards capable of being used for identifying registered individuals; to make it an offence for a person to be in possession or control of an identity document to which he is not entitled, or of apparatus, articles or materials for making false identity documents; to amend the Consular Fees Act 1980; to make provision facilitating the verification of information provided with an application for a passport; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 9].

REGULATION OF FINANCIAL SERVICES (LAND TRANSACTIONS)

Mr. Ivan Lewis, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Darling, Mr. Secretary Hain, Mr. Des Browne, Dawn Primarolo and John Healey, presented a Bill to enable activities relating to certain arrangements involving the acquisition or disposal of land to be regulated under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 7].

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SIXTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [17 May],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament—*[Mr Barron.]*

Question again proposed.

The Economy and Welfare Reform

Mr. Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have selected for debate the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. Standing Order No. 33 provides that on the last day of the debate on the Motion for an Address to Her Majesty, the House may also vote on a second amendment selected by the Speaker. I have selected the amendment in the name of the leader of the Liberal Democratic party for that purpose. The vote on that amendment will take place at the end of the debate, after the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition has been disposed of.

12.37 pm

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at end add—

'but regret that the Gracious Speech does not contain measures to address the major challenges the British economy now faces to ensure its competitiveness in the light of unprecedented global competition; further regret the absence of measures to bridge the skills gap so that the UK has the right skills for tomorrow's economy; deplore the failure to include in the Gracious Speech a credible programme for cutting the burden of regulation which stifles business and holds back entrepreneurs; condemn the absence of measures to ensure value for taxpayers' money in order to improve public services and remove the need for further tax increases; and further regret the absence of measures in the Gracious Speech to tackle the pensions crisis to which Government policy has contributed, or to encourage savings to help give people greater security and dignity in retirement.'.

Let me start by congratulating the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr. Brown), on his new constituency, and on his reappointment as Chancellor. He is the longest serving Chancellor in recent British history, and I genuinely congratulate him on that impressive record. I know that he sees himself as Prime Minister in waiting, and I only hope that he proves better at being Prime Minister than he has been at waiting.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) back to his place. Later today he will demonstrate to new

Members how to deliver a kind of maiden speech while winding up a Queen's Speech debate. It is traditional for a new Member to take us on a tour of their constituency, and I am particularly looking forward to my right hon. Friend praising the progressive thinking to be found in Notting Hill.

Last week at the CBI's annual dinner, the Chancellor called for a national consensus on the way ahead for our economy. He said that the Government should be more humble—not a word that regularly passes the lips of this Chancellor of the Exchequer. Perhaps he stumbled across it while looking up "hubris" in the dictionary.

Let us explore the Chancellor's new-found humility and put his call for a national consensus to the test. I am willing to acknowledge that the British economy has enjoyed 51 quarters of continuous growth if he is willing to acknowledge that by the time he entered office, 19 of them had already happened. I am willing to accept that giving the Bank of England independence was the right thing to do, if he is ready to accept the recent Bank of England report that says that the current period of remarkable stability began five years before Labour came to power.

I am happy to recognise the value of his golden rule, if he is happy to recognise that it is undermined because the Chancellor is his own judge and jury on that rule. Whatever happened to the panel of independent forecasters that would decide whether the golden rule had been met? The Chancellor proposed it himself 10 years ago, but when that idea appeared in our manifesto this year, he opposed it. What sort of national consensus are we going to build if he cannot even agree with his own ideas?

I will also support the Chancellor's sustainable investment rule, if he will publish more honest national accounts. A report says today that £40 billion-worth of private finance initiative and other liabilities are hidden off balance sheets. We should stop this fiddling and have an independent national statistics office. It was in the Labour manifesto in 1997, and it was in our manifesto this year. What more of a consensus is he looking for? He should get away and implement it.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I welcome him to his new post and wish him well in the internal strife ahead. Which of these two positions does he agree with more—that of his hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), who says that concentrating on cutting red tape and tax cuts is not much of an economic policy, or that of his right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who says that unless the Tory party concentrates immediately on promising £12 billion in fresh tax cuts, there is no way forward? Whom does he agree with more, and will he ever be able to speak to his hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) again?

Mr. Osborne: I am not sure that I got that last bit. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that cutting red tape is not a serious economic policy, he should have a word with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, because that is all that he has been talking about for the last two weeks. As for the internal strife that the hon. Gentleman alleges is in our party, does he agree with the national consensus that the Prime Minister should perhaps step down earlier in this Parliament and let the Chancellor of the Exchequer take over? Did the hon. Gentleman have a picture of the Chancellor in his election address or one of the Prime Minister, or was he hedging his bets and using both?

If we can get on with building this national consensus, let me mention the housing proposal. If the Chancellor wants to help first-time buyers, as I do, we will support the principle of shared equity—after all, we proposed it first, more than a year ago—but he has to admit that the number of first-time buyers each year has fallen by almost a third under Labour. We will wait to see the details of his proposal.

Mr. Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent, South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Osborne: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. Did he have a picture of Blair or of Brown in his election address?

Mr. Flello: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I feel that a point needs to be pressed, because I am not quite sure about it. I think that he said to the House on 6 April that he was in favour of £4 billion of tax cuts, but I am not sure whether he still feels that way, or whether he agrees with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) that that does not go far enough. Will he clarify that point?

Mr. Osborne: If I may give some advice to the new Member, he should not take the planted questions of the Labour Whips Office. They are not very good.

Let us get on with some consensus on the state of the economy. I will accept that inflation is low, if the Chancellor accepts that it is higher than when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer. I will accept that official unemployment has fallen, if he will accept that the number of young people languishing neither in work nor in full-time education has risen to more than 1 million. I will accept the good news that he has to tell us about the economy, if he will accept that disposable incomes are down, retail sales are down, the housing market is fragile, output growth is down, corporate profits are down, manufacturing jobs are being lost and foreign investment is shrinking, and that we have a record trade deficit and a huge balance of payments problem.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Osborne: What is the hon. Gentleman's answer to that?

Mark Tami: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. For the third time, can he tell us what Tory tax policy is?

Mr. Osborne: We proposed at the general election a reduction in taxation of £4 billion, including an incentive to help people save for their pensions, which is part of the subject of this debate. We lost the election, although we got more votes than the hon. Gentleman's party did in England. Therefore we will review our policies, and no doubt produce policies to reduce taxes later in the Parliament.

[Mr. Osborne]

Previous Chancellors of the Exchequer had a medium-term financial strategy. This Chancellor has a medium-term political strategy. He wants to be out of the Treasury before the chickens come home to roost. I do not mean that the business cycle will turn but that it will become increasingly clear that he does not have the answers to the long-term economic challenges facing the country. Those challenges are clear, and include the competitiveness challenge. Can Britain compete with the rest of the world so that we continue to raise the living standards of our citizens? There is a public services challenge—can Britain build modern reformed public services so that we continue to improve the quality of life in our communities? There is also a pensions challenge—can Britain solve the pensions crisis, and give millions of people security in their retirement?

Let us start with the competitiveness challenge.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Is it true, as *The Times* reported today, that the shadow Chancellor was intent on pursuing an honest career in journalism before he met someone from Tory central office in a pub? Is that not an object lesson in the dangers that can lurk for young people in drinking dens?

Mr. Osborne: I think that I had better answer that question at the end of the debate.

I was talking about the competitiveness challenge facing the country. Britain is losing ground to the rest of the world. Under this Government, Britain has fallen from fourth to 11th place in the World Economic Forum's international competitiveness league. The amount of direct foreign investment that we attract has almost halved. Our share of world trade has plummeted at a time when the share enjoyed not just by China and India but by Germany has increased. The Governor of the Bank of England said earlier this month that our

"net trade has subtracted from economic growth"

for every year of the Labour Government. He said that that was

"almost unprecedented in economic history".

Why does the Chancellor not stick that record in one of his election posters?

People realise that Britain is going to struggle to compete in future for low-cost low-skilled work, but they must also accept that highly skilled jobs are under threat too, not just from China, which is producing 2 million graduates a year, or India, which has more than 1,300 engineering colleges and 270 universities, but from central and eastern European countries.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Osborne: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman. He is a Brownite, so presumably he wants the Chancellor to take over sooner rather than later.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Part of the competitive economy is a well-trained and well-educated work force. Does the hon. Gentleman, as an ex-public schoolboy, stand by his party's commitment to passporting money to parents, or does he agree with the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) that that policy would be rejected by the electorate? One would expect most people to give up such a policy.

Mr. Osborne: I suspect that that was a veiled attack on the Prime Minister and his public school education, which is true to form for the hon. Gentleman. I remind him that our education policies, which were designed for England, received the majority of the votes in England—but obviously we will review them. We do not want to compete by cutting wages and living standards. We want to compete by improving our country's productivity.

The only thing that drives sustainable economic growth and a long-term improvement in living standards is productivity growth. The Chancellor himself calls productivity

"a fundamental yardstick of economic performance".

His record, however, simply does not measure up to that yardstick. Productivity growth has fallen in each of the last eight years, and the productivity gap with the United States is widening. Why is that the case? It is not because the British people do not have the dynamism and the energy to succeed in the world, but because they are being held back by the Chancellor's obsession with meddling and interfering—his micro-management of the micro-economy. For a start, he is holding back businesses with £40 billion-worth of new regulation. He admits that there have been too many false starts on cutting red tape. He should know, because he started them. He launched and relaunched regulatory drives in 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003 and 2004—and he will probably launch another one when he speaks in this debate.

Instead of judging the Chancellor on his words, we will look at what happens on the ground, and whether life becomes easier for the small business struggling under a mountain of Government paperwork. He will not get very far lecturing the rest of Europe about the need for economic reform when his own MEPs have voted to extend the 48-hour working week to Britain. I keep reading that he is the most powerful man in the Labour party and that no one dares to sneeze in its councils and committees without his say-so, so why did he allow his MEPs to stick two fingers up to him just as he is about to take over the chairmanship of meetings of European Finance Ministers? I would be interested to learn what he has to say about his MEPs.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Osborne: I would also be interested to know whether the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) supports the action of the Labour MEPs.

Dr. Palmer: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman supports the draconian code of conduct for Conservative MPs being extended to Conservative MEPs, too.

Mr. Osborne: I am not entirely sure that that is relevant to this debate.

How are British companies supposed to compete when they have already been hit with £43 billion of new business taxes? Taxation is now the key factor for four

out of five companies in determining their international investment locations. Let us look at what is happening in the rest of western Europe, let alone the rest of the world. Germany is cutting its corporation tax, and France, Denmark, Sweden and Italy—hardly bastions of neo-liberalism—have all cut their tax-GDP ratios in recent years. In Britain, however, Labour has increased taxes and will increase them further, whatever the Chancellor promised in the election.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Osborne: That is the view of almost every independent economic observer, and I would be interested to know whether it is the view of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller).

Andrew Miller: The hon. Gentleman and I have constituencies in the same county, and he knows that Cheshire has some important businesses with strong connections to Germany. He has twice mentioned Germany in his speech. Does he really believe that the German economy is on a sounder footing than the economy here, given that Opel workers have taken a pay freeze until 2010 because of the problems and massive cuts that they have faced?

Mr. Osborne: The point is that we are heading in the same direction as Germany if we continue to raise taxes and regulation. The Chancellor always compares our record with that of the countries of western Europe. He never compares our record with the other developed countries of the world—the English-speaking economies—in comparison with which we are performing much worse. My point is that while we are heading towards higher taxes, those in the rest of the world, including Germany, are reducing their taxes.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that in my constituency of Aldershot, about three years ago, a German company invested a substantial amount of money in a new facility, and chose to do so in the United Kingdom? The managing director of that company told me about six months ago that if it had to make that decision again today, it would locate not in the United Kingdom but in Germany.

Mr. Osborne: My hon. Friend's point is extremely telling, and supports my case that we are heading in the wrong direction.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Osborne: I will make a little progress with my speech and give way later.

At a time when the rest of the developed world are reducing taxes and burdens to compete with the emerging giants of India and China, this country is going in the wrong direction. That is the competitive challenge.

There is a public services challenge, too. The Chancellor admitted last week that low skills are what he called the "Achilles heel" of our economy. One fifth of job vacancies are unfilled because of a shortage of skills, yet colleges are warning this week that 200,000 places on adult education and training courses could be cut from September. Does the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas) support that cut?

Ian Lucas: I do not support that. I invite the hon. Gentleman to take a short drive down the M56 from his constituency to Wrexham in north Wales, and to meet the managing directors of Sharp UK from Japan, and Ipsen Biopharm from France, both of which, in the past year, have decided to place their confidence and future in my constituency, reducing unemployment there to less than 2 per cent., compared with 20 per cent. when the Conservative party was in power. Is it not about time he started listening to business? He is welcome to come to Wrexham any time to meet strong British manufacturing companies.

Mr. Osborne: I would be delighted to come to Wrexham, but I point out to the hon. Gentleman that foreign direct investment in this country has fallen from £20 billion a year in 1997 to £12 billion now. That is the general picture affecting the country.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): At least they are still investing.

Mr. Osborne: The Deputy Prime Minister says that at least they are still investing, but the amount has almost halved under his Government, and I do not see how he can be proud of that. If we want to stay ahead in the world we need to keep adding value to stay at the cutting edge as technology moves on. We need the best educated and best trained people in the world. The British people have the ability to do that, but they are being let down by this Government. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development figures, the UK education system under Labour has fallen from fourth to 11th place in the world for science, 7th to 11th place for reading, and eighth to 18th for maths.

No one doubts that the Chancellor is spending a great deal of money. On his current plans, he will have increased the share of the nation's income spent by the state by 5 per cent. He has always confused inputs with outputs, however. He should talk to the Minister for Pensions—formerly the Financial Secretary—who said:

"Too often a lot of money has been spent but very little seems to have been achieved".

He was spot-on when he said that. Four years ago, when the Chancellor turned on the public spending tap, he said:

"There will not be one penny more until we ... make the reforms".

That was the moment when he could have brought about a transformation of our public services—he had the money and the majority; now both are running out. He only has himself to blame. Who in Government has opposed every minor reform that a succession of beleaguered Health and Education Secretaries have tried to push through? It has been the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the road block to reform in this Government.

The challenge of the next five years is to build modern, reformed and diverse public services. We understand that. Even the Prime Minister, in his twilight years in

[Mr. Osborne]

Downing street, is coming to understand that. The insurmountable obstacle to meeting that challenge, however, is sitting in front of us on the Treasury Bench. That is the public services challenge.

Then we have a pensions challenge. We welcome the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to his place. He has the task of sorting out the mess that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has created. It is a refreshing start that he makes no attempt to defend the £5 billion tax on pensions—the single most damaging thing that this Chancellor has done in office. We will also be interested to hear what the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has to say about the Chancellor's means-tested pension credit. Adair Turner said at the weekend:

"we have to stop the spread of means testing. It is a disincentive to save".

There was a time when the Chancellor would have agreed. Back in 1988, the Chancellor stood at this Dispatch Box in opposition, and condemned means-testing of pensioner benefits as the most serious Government assault so far mounted on the basic principles of Britain's welfare state. Yet what has he done in office? He has extended the means test to half of all pensioners. The previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions called the pension credit a medium-term solution, before it turned out that he was just a short-term solution. What is the Chancellor's solution?

Then there is the issue of compulsory pension saving. We welcome the new hon. Member for Normanton (Ed Balls) to this place. At last he emerges from the shadows, and we have both the Chancellor and his "mini-me" in the House. During the recent campaign, the hon. Member for Normanton said at a Labour party press conference—he remembers it well—that another election would have to take place before any compulsory saving was imposed. The new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions overruled him, however, saying the new hon. Member for Normanton was speaking only

"as a parliamentary candidate not as a spokesman".

Where does that leave the Chancellor? He said during the campaign:

"I don't believe there could be legislation in this Parliament. It would have to be in a future Parliament."

I suppose that he, too, was speaking as a parliamentary candidate and not as a spokesman. Would the Chancellor or the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions like to confirm their views on the matter? Could there be legislation on compulsion in this Parliament? I will take an intervention from either of them, or both of them—I think that they are sorting out the position as we speak.

Let me quote:

"when Labour came to office we had one of the strongest pension provisions in Europe and now probably we have some of the weakest".

Those are the words of the first pensions Minister, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field)—an epitaph to this Chancellor's record in office.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Osborne: Sorting that out is the pensions challenge—the third of the long-term economic challenges that this country faces. I would be interested to know what the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) thinks about compulsory saving.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I am particularly interested in the hon. Gentleman's statement about what has happened since this Government came to office. What does he feel when looking back at 1997, when the basic state pension was £69 a week? Does he not realise that when we knocked on doors during the election campaign, people who had to exist on that were saying to us that the pension credit helped them out of absolute poverty? Does he not recognise that, or is he condemning his party to another era out of government?

Mr. Osborne: I had better read out again what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, the first pensions Minister in this Government, said, and the hon. Gentleman should pay attention this time:

"when Labour came to office we had one of the strongest pension provisions in Europe and now : . . we have some of the weakest".

With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, I have more respect for views of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead on pension policy than for his.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Osborne: I cannot resist giving way to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the shadow Chancellor. Does he not understand that hundreds of thousands of people, women in particular, get to pensionable age without having acquired a full stamp and without having a full basic state pension behind them? Those are the poorest pensioners, whom this Government have done so much to help, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the people of Rhondda are extremely grateful to the Government for rescuing people from pensioner poverty.

Mr. Osborne: I agree that there is a problem with poor female pensioners who have not built up national insurance contributions over their lifetime. In the general election the Conservative party put forward policies to help remedy that. However, I suggest that this is something that Adair Turner's commission particularly needs to look at. I point out that the commission is especially critical of the pension credit because it acts as a disincentive to saving, and one cannot solve the pensions crisis if there is a disincentive to saving.

Huw Irranca-Davies *rose—*

Mr. Osborne: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I want to make progress, but I cannot resist giving way to him again.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I am disappointed at the hon. Gentleman's lowly esteem in the House, but after his last comment I can only say that we may have a mutual estimation of each other's worth.

When I knocked on pensioners' doors, they said that they were interested in looking at the Conservatives' pensions proposals, but they asked why, in the whole of the period for which they were in government, the Conservatives only once raised the earnings link with the basic state pension, and left pensioners on £69 a week. Will the right hon. Gentleman answer a simple question? Does he feel that £69 a week was a good level at which to leave the state pension?

Mr. Osborne: I think that I shall have to read out for the third time the quote from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead. He said that

"when Labour came to office we had one of the strongest pension provisions in Europe and now probably we have some of the weakest".

The hon. Member for Ogmore can go on intervening on me and I will go on quoting the words of the first pensions Minister of this Government.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that during the election I met many people in west Norfolk who are members of the Albert Fisher and Dalgety pension schemes, which are now in wind-up? They have lost everything that they paid in, and will not get a pension. Does not my hon. Friend think that a disaster, and does he not also feel that what the Government are proposing is completely inadequate?

Mr. Osborne: I absolutely agree. The amount of money that the Government have set aside does not begin to meet the problem, which is why we propose using the unclaimed assets of banks to deal with it. It is interesting that the Treasury is now looking at that idea, and we will wait and see whether it uses those assets for the desperate situation that my hon. Friend has highlighted.

The Chancellor always thought that he would be out of the Treasury before any of these challenges caught up with him, but it seems that however many times the Prime Minister fools him, he never learns. There he stands in the Treasury, the packing cases ready, the removal van in the drive and his coat on—then the Prime Minister buys him an ice cream, and it is back to square one. At least the first time the Prime Minister did him over he took him to a restaurant and bought him dinner.

The Chancellor is stuck at the Treasury, and he cannot duck the economic challenges facing the country. We need to keep taxes and regulation low so that we can compete, and there he sits—the road block to reform. We need modern public services and a more skilled work force, and there he sits—the road block to reform. We need to solve the pensions crisis and encourage people to save, and there he sits—the road block to reform. It looks increasingly as if this 20th-century Chancellor is running out of answers to the challenges of the 21st century.

1.4 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Let me start by saying what a pleasure it is to welcome the new shadow Chancellor. I look forward to answering every point that he made. It is always a pleasure to welcome a new shadow Chancellor. In fact, since 1997 I have had the pleasure of welcoming seven new shadow Chancellors and six new shadow Chief Secretaries. It is perhaps appropriate that I am welcoming the new shadow Chancellor when we are discussing equipping Britain for the challenges ahead.

Alongside the public sector reform Bills that have been discussed in the previous debates, I want to discuss the even more extensive economic reform that is necessary to achieve prosperity in this country, not for some but for all, and to advance this country towards full employment. Measures that I want to discuss with the House today include those to increase housing supply so that, adding to the 1 million extra home owners since 1997, we can have in total 2 million extra home owners by 2010. There is also our business Bill to deepen the enterprise culture—new help for small and medium-sized businesses which will be worth £250 million. With the welfare reform Bills and other measures, new obligations and new opportunities will be created which, building on 2 million jobs that we have already created since 1997, in this Parliament will help 1 million more people through the new deal.

Turning to the child care and parents Bills in the Queen's speech, through Sure Start and extended schools we will put in place the first national child care strategy in this country. There will be 1 million more child care places and there will be affordable child care for the parents of this country. Those Queen's Speech measures immediately honour our general election commitments to be on the side of this country's hard-working families. The whole House will also want me to outline, in advance of the EU and G7 meetings that will take place a few days from now, our detailed proposals for debt relief, trade justice and overseas aid, to reduce world poverty and meet the millennium development goals on which I hope and believe there will be an all-party consensus.

Having congratulated the new shadow Chancellor and welcomed him to his new position, let me say how much I will miss the contribution to the Treasury debates of the former shadow Chancellor. I see that he has just left the Chamber, but let me say that we all admire the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) for his candour. [HON. MEMBERS: "He is here!"] I am glad that he is here; I can now thank him personally because on occasion I have had reason to be grateful for his candour. The right hon. Gentleman departed the Treasury brief with the characteristic candour for which we have learned to feel affection: his statement touchingly made it clear that he was leaving to spend more time with his merchant bank.

I also welcome back to his customary place the shadow Chancellor for the Liberal Democrats. In line with their election slogan to be "relentlessly positive", they have not ditched their shadow Chancellor; they have just ditched every one of his policies. Now they have this new clean slate approach, let our constituents hear no more of these unaffordable and uncosted spending promises, especially when not one of them could be afforded if they replaced their 50 per cent. income tax and local income tax with their new idea, very suitable to the Liberals, of a flat tax.

Let me say what a pleasure it is to have so many senior Conservative Members on the Front Bench for part of this debate—so many people who will be able to tell

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

their grandchildren in future years that they used to be the next leader of the Conservative party. Now we know precisely why the shadow Chancellor ruled himself out of the leadership race. As for the shadow Chancellor himself, it may be too early to judge, but it may be time for the Conservative party to skip yet another generation.

The Queen's Speech reaffirms our fundamental and first priority as a Government: economic stability. Even amidst a succession of economic challenges since 1997, including the American downturn and the doubling of oil prices, and now facing the challenges, acknowledged by the shadow Chancellor, of Chinese and Asian competition, changing technology and current account imbalances, our measures, such as Bank of England independence—opposed, by the way, by Conservative Members—our symmetrical inflation target, opposed by Conservative Members, our fiscal rules, opposed by Conservative Members, and the new deal, opposed by Conservative Members, have helped achieve years of continuous growth for this country.

Our stability is for a purpose: to ensure businesses are able to invest and that home owners have a fair deal. That is because all of us—I believe that this is true of Members in all sections of the House—were struck during the election campaign by how many more young people, couples especially but also single people, now want to buy their first home but need, even with our low interest rates and the stamp duty changes that we made, further help to get on to the first rung of the housing ladder. The Deputy Prime Minister and I now propose to match the low interests and changes in stamp duty with help, implementing the next stage of the Barker review, to extend the number of home owners in this country.

English Partnerships has identified 700 sites of public sector land that are now being considered for new building, including Ministry of Defence sites, which will be released for house building, and vacant sites around railway stations in London. Including those announced today, a total of 100 national health service sites are being or have been released for future housing.

Mr. Bellingham: The Chancellor mentioned the MOD. Had he been Prime Minister after 5 May, would he have appointed the noble Lord Drayson to the position of Minister for Defence Procurement?

Mr. Brown: Appointments are made by the Prime Minister, and rightly so. Over time, the hon. Gentleman will find that he is discussing defence issues with a distinguished member of the Government.

The Government have been negotiating a pioneer shared equity scheme with HBOS, Nationwide and other lenders representing slightly less than half of the mortgage market. Building societies, Government and future owners will be able to make the first step in home ownership cheaper and within people's financial reach. We will publish more details of those proposals today.

The third element is cutting the cost of construction. The Deputy Prime Minister announces today the next stage of his competition for £60,000 homes. A thousand new homes will be started in January, with the first to be completed and ready for occupation during the course of next year. We shall also progress our plans to transform old housing estates across the country into mixed community estates, with home owners side by side with tenants. In the planning system, merging the regional housing and planning bodies, as recommended by Barker, will mean that regions are able to take a strategic view of meeting housing and infrastructure needs. We shall consult during the summer on requiring local authorities to prepare and release more land more quickly for new building. To speed up planning decisions, the Deputy Prime Minister will make the planning delivery grant subject to even faster progress: our target will be 60 per cent. of major applications being dealt with within 30 weeks, and minor ones in eight weeks.

Last year, 180,000 houses were built; this year, 200,000 are likely to be built—the highest rate for more than 15 years. We believe that, with the new measures being introduced over the course of this Parliament, Britain will have higher home ownership rates than the United States of America, France, Germany and other major countries.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is going to support our proposals.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: In fact, I am going to urge the Chancellor to go further in his shared ownership scheme. To enable more people to buy their house, will he discuss with the financial institutions the possibility of amending the rules to make equity release for older people easier, so that they can both be more comfortable in their old age and consider giving money to their children, so that they, in turn, can buy at least part of the equity in their new house?

Mr. Brown: We are looking at such matters all the time, but there is another question that the hon. Gentleman and Conservative Front Benchers should address. If we are to make progress on our housing programme, not only will we need to maintain the stability of the economy—I have yet to see Conservative proposals that would achieve that—but they will have to acknowledge that public investment is necessary. Instead of simultaneously supporting our housing plans but refusing to give their support to public investment, the Conservatives must be realistic and accept that public investment has a part to play in solving this country's housing problems.

Steve McCabe: The intervention of the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) has confused me. How does stealing the capital from granny's flat or house help the housing crisis in this country?

Mr. Brown: I told the hon. Member for Cotswold that we examine equity release schemes continuously. That should be the subject of a wider debate in the House.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am delighted that the Chancellor has embraced the shared ownership scheme first proposed by the

Conservatives last year, although the Deputy Prime Minister rubbished it at the time. That is a matter of public record. While the Chancellor is dealing with public ownership and public housing, will he answer a plain question? Since they came to power, the Government have halved the number of social houses being built each year: in the mid-1990s, about 40,000 social houses were built each year; now, fewer than 20,000 are. Given that 100,000 people are languishing in temporary accommodation, desperate to get on the housing ladder, why have the Government done that and what will the Chancellor do about it?

Mr. Brown: At the election, the Conservatives proposed cutting the housing budget. We have said that we will double investment in social housing. A million houses have been upgraded and a further million will be. However, it makes no sense for Conservatives to assume that they can get their way on increasing housing investment without making a commitment to increase public investment. The shadow Chancellor will have to face this challenge early in his time in the role. If he wants improvement in housing, he will have to say that he will make the investment available.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I want to make some progress. I shall give way again later.

Our housing measures are possible only because of the stability that we have achieved. Even when America, Japan, Germany and France have been in recession, we have delivered an unprecedented period of stability in this country. Even this year, with north America, Britain is the area that has the fastest-growing economy in the G7 countries. Growth since 1997 has been twice that of Germany and Japan.

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I am happy to do so. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can solve the Conservatives' dilemma and say whether he is prepared to support more public investment in housing.

Gregory Barker: Perhaps the Chancellor will confirm something for me—that since 1997 Britain has not advanced from fourth place in the international competitiveness rankings, but slipped back to 11th?

Mr. Brown: It so happens that I have the rankings drawn up by many different organisations right here. The latest KPMG review found we have one of the best competition policies in the world. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman must learn to be patient, or he will not get all the facts that will be of use to him when he challenges the shadow Chancellor for a change in Conservative economic policy. The latest *Global Competition Review* ranked the UK joint third. Independent international surveys show that the UK is one of the best places in the world to start and run a business. The OECD rated the UK as having the lowest barriers to entrepreneurship of any major economy. The OECD economic survey of the UK stated that competitive pressures appeared to be relatively strong in the UK. Finally, in the United States, the Heritage Foundation—a most right-wing body familiar to the Conservatives—classifies the UK's economy as far more liberal now than it was before 1997, when the Conservatives were in power.

We are not going to take lectures from the Conservative party on how to run an economy when, under the Labour Government, inflation has been half the average inflation of the Conservative years, interest rates have been half those of the Conservative years and mortgage rates have been half those of the Conservative years. Under the present Government, interest rates have risen five times: at their present rate of 4.75 per cent., they are lower than in any month of Conservative Government from 1979 to 1997.

Gregory Barker: Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman will have to be patient and not try to do the shadow Chancellor's job for him.

The shadow Chancellor questions our ability to meet our fiscal rules. Let me sum up the position—it might help the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind), who is to wind up the debate for the Opposition. He was a Cabinet Minister in the Conservative Government, and I warmly welcome him back to the House of Commons. The shadow Chancellor made great play of the fact that our golden rule is in danger of not being met: in fact, on the radio on Friday, he said that it would be met, but today he says it will not. Let me tell him by how much the Conservative Government missed the golden rule. Was it by £5 billion, or £10 billion, or £20 billion? No. In their first economic cycle, they missed it by £145 billion. In their second economic cycle—it is the one with which the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was most associated—they managed to achieve a deficit of £235 billion. When I say that we have the lowest deficits of the major industrial countries—lower than those of America, Japan, France and Germany—we also have lower debts. We see in the economy not weakness but resilience. We shall take no lectures, either on manufacturing or on tax, or on public borrowing, from the Conservative party.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: I am not sure whether I want a debate on the European Union, but I suppose that I should allow the hon. Gentleman to speak.

Sir Peter Tapsell: If things are so rosy, why does the IMF tell us that our fiscal stance is rapidly deteriorating?

Mr. Brown: The IMF praised the management of the British economy. It said that its management— *[Interruption.]* I had an interesting discussion with the IMF when I pointed out to it not only that its figures were out of date but that I disagreed with its view.

The Conservative party—the shadow Chancellor, with the benefit of the advice of the former shadow Chancellor, will have to clarify the issue—may believe in

[Mr. Brown]

a balanced Budget. That is what the former shadow Chancellor was trying to arrive at. That happens to be the view of the IMF, but it is not the view of the Government. How many Conservative Members were calling for more roads and more bridges to be built in their constituencies? We believe that it is right for transport investment and for education investment that we borrow to invest as long as we have a sustainable level of debt. As the former Chancellor will acknowledge, the level of debt fell from 44 per cent. of GDP under his chancellorship to just over 30 per cent. during Labour's chancellorship. That is why it is right for this country to be able to borrow for investment so that we can meet urgent needs that are essential if we are to have the skills, the transport and the infrastructure to compete with China and India in future.

Lynne Jones: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Brown: I have given way on several occasions.

We have measures in the Queen's Speech not only for housing but to improve the balance between work and family life. The Queen's Speech sets out the importance to our economic strategy of child care. I believe that during the recent general election families welcomed the measures that we put forward: paid maternity leave to be increased to nine months, leave transferable, extending the right to request flexible working, extending nursery education to 15 hours, and the typical constituency to have an average of half a dozen Sure Start children's centres by the time this Parliament finishes. There will be pre-school and after-school child care in extended schools. Governments in the past never even mentioned in Queen's Speeches the needs of parents of under-fives. We are able through the Queen's Speech to legislate for what effectively will be a new frontier for our welfare state to help families in bringing up their children, and particularly to meet the education and health needs of the under-fives.

That proves that just as we are the Government of home owners, we are the Government of working families.

Lynne Jones: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Brown: It is—*[Interruption.]* It is strange that Conservative Members are looking to my hon. Friend to do what the shadow Chancellor should be doing.

Lynne Jones: I am sorry to take my right hon. Friend back to the subject of investment in housing. I was disappointed that he did not say how the Government intend to meet the Barker review targets for affordable rented housing. It is true that the Government have substantially increased investment in housing, but that investment was at a low level when we inherited it in 1997. Current plans will not reach the Barker target. How will we reach that level? It is probably an underestimate, given the amount of demolition of unsatisfactory council housing that has taken place in cities such as Birmingham.

Mr. Brown: In total, we are refurbishing 2 million houses. If my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I have not given my hon. Friend the conclusions from the consultation on the Barker review, it is because the review is still out to consultation. We shall set out the final recommendations when we have the final report following the consultation that has taken place.

Last week's employment figures showed—

Mr. Salmond: Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I have given way quite enough. Every time I give way to the leader of the Scottish National party I have to point out that employment is rising in Scotland, despite everything that he says.

Last week's employment figures showed that employment is above 28 million. Last week we had more people in employment than at any time in the history of our country. With unemployment falling, the spending on benefits on unemployment—this is a point that the Conservatives must realise—has halved since 1997. We have saved £5 billion a year, which we can now spend on health, education and other social services.

Our employment success is not an accident. We did not reduce unemployment by the laissez-faire policies of the Conservatives, of leaving things to chance. We did it by combining stability with the existence of a new deal. Unemployment in the UK is half what it is in France, in Germany or in the euro area. The shadow Chancellor might have said that, as a result of Government policies, unemployment in his constituency has been reduced to just 1 per cent. Perhaps the shadow Chief Secretary will be pleased to hear that unemployment in his constituency is 0.9 per cent. Both constituencies, like so many others, have seen a 50 per cent. fall in unemployment since 1997. However, we are not complacent and there is a great deal more to do.

With higher skills at a premium in meeting global competition, it is time, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will be saying this evening, to extend and improve the new deal as a new deal for skills. It would be wrong to follow the advice of the Liberals or the Conservatives at this stage and abolish the new deal.

The Queen's Speech announces the steps that we are taking to help more single parents, more young unemployed and more incapacity benefit claimants to get work. In return for new opportunities there are, however, new obligations for many who are unemployed. For those in the first three months out of work, we shall test and then extend widely a new jobseeker's agreement of work-search requirements and regular signing on. For those who are six months out of work, we are piloting in 12 areas a personal action plan that is based on compulsory interviews and an intensive work programme. For those who refuse, there is to be a tougher sanction regime. In return for these new obligations, we shall in this Parliament help 3 million adults gain basic qualifications so that they can play their full part in a modern economy in all constituencies. Those who stay on after 16 in education or unwaged training and who need finance could receive up to £75 a week in educational maintenance allowances and children's benefits. There will be special transitional help for 16 and 17-year-olds who have fallen through the net. In partnership with business, which has welcomed this, and the trade unions there will be another 50,000 people in apprenticeships by 2008.

The question for the Conservative party and for everybody who is concerned about these matters is whether they are prepared to support the public investment that is necessary for the apprenticeships, the improvement in youth training and the improvement in education.

Mr. Salmond: Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I have given way quite enough and I have some further announcements to make.

When Rover went into liquidation, all parties in the House supported the emergency measures. The measures to train and to retrain and to provide job-search advice and relocation help are possible only because we have an employment service. They are possible only because there is a rapid response. It is only because the new deal is on people's side. It is only because we have a Labour market policy that is active. Is not what happened at Rover an example of why Governments, while refusing to subsidise loss makers, cannot simply walk away?

What all the Queen's Speech measures have in common—public investment in the new deal, in skills, in child care and in shared equity—is the idea of a Government who stand with people and support them as they face change in their lives and communities. That is not laissez-faire but being on the side of hard-working families. It is the role of Government in the modern world not to stand against change, not to freeze the frame but, on the other hand, not to do nothing. Our role is to help people through change. That is the modern and the most appropriate role for the responsibilities of the community in relation to individuals and the market. That shows what we mean by fairness for families at a time of change and need.

Where does the Conservative party now stand on these issues? What Conservative vision of the future has emerged from the Queen's Speech debates? What is the Conservative economic prescription for the future of our country? What is unique about the Queen's Speech debates as I have watched them over the past few days is that we do not have, as usual, a Labour economic plan as against a Conservative economic plan. There is one Labour economic plan and about half a dozen Conservative economic plans.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con) *rose—*

Mr. Brown: Ah! I may have said half a dozen, but I should have said seven Conservative economic plans.

Mr. Clarke: The Chancellor has brought me to my feet by touching on the future for a moment. He has taken us back over his record and ours, citing figures that go back a quarter of a century in some cases, to make comparisons favourable to himself. Given that we have seen a rapid fall in consumption in this country, a rapid fall in retail sales, a stabilisation, at best, in the housing market and a large fall in industrial production so far this year, does he still stand by his forecast of economic growth for this year, looking ahead? It is upon those forecasts that all his confidence about his economic policy and his fiscal policy appears to depend.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the former Chancellor for giving me the chance to say that I believe that north America and Britain will be the fastest growing economic areas this year. We will publish our next economic forecast—*[Interruption.]* I know that the former Chancellor would like to think that Germany, France and the euro area were growing faster, but they are not. Britain and the north American countries will be the fastest growing areas of the G7 this year. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has a good reputation for getting many things right, but in 1998, the year after we came into government, he said in *The Mail on Sunday*:

"Our gloomy Chancellor is going to bust our economy without any risk of a boom coming first. I have been forecasting doom and gloom for the British economy in my column in *Financial Mail* for most of the past year."

No recession, but stability, happened not only that year, but for the next seven years.

I said we had half a dozen Conservative plans. As we finish the Queen's Speech debates, it is important that we see what the debate in the House is all about. Always helpful to his Front-Bench team and now to the new shadow Chancellor, the shadow Minister for deregulation, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who was mentioned earlier, wants £12 billion of tax cuts. The shadow Foreign Secretary made a speech only a few days ago, saying that he wanted a "radically smaller public sector" and even bigger tax cuts. The shadow Home Secretary, the favourite for the leadership, said that the Conservatives must

"make the moral case for lower taxes from now".

The view taken by all three is that they lost the past three elections not because they were too right wing, but because they were not right wing enough.

Against that, we have the other economic prescriptions. The shadow Health Secretary spoke of

"cutting tax only if you can".

The former shadow transport Minister said:

"You have to talk about issues other than tax cuts".

The current shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry stated:

"Cutting tax . . . does not add up to an economic policy on its own".

The former shadow Chief Secretary, one of the half-dozen former shadow Chief Secretaries of the past eight years, says that we need a new agenda for the state that puts public services first, rather than tax cuts.

The only Conservative shadow Minister without an economic prescription in these debates is the man responsible for economic policy, the shadow Chancellor. Now surrounded by so many diverse and divided prescriptions for the economy, the cracks are already so wide and extensive that, if I may be excused for saying so, even the heir to a distinguished wallpaper empire cannot paper over them.

How does the Conservative party resolve these great issues? I can do no better than share with the House the thoughts of Chairman Maude, the current chairman of the Conservative party. I have the full report of the remarks that he made to the newspapers, explaining what he thought should be the direction of the Conservative party from now on. He was asked what the public believe is wrong about the Conservatives. Was it the leadership, personalities or policies? No, he said—

"It's the belief that we (sometimes) live on a different planet".

[Mr. Brown]

That is not just a reference to the shadow Minister for deregulation. He went on:

"It is the sense that we don't understand modern Britain . . . We are thought to be backward looking . . . We have to stop being the party that disapproves of people"

and

"occasionally sounds like it doesn't like modern Britain".

Even more dispiritingly for Opposition Members, he said:

"We have a real problem in that Conservative Associations in some parts of the country are moribund. They barely exist. . . We are about a tenth of the way there."

If that advice was not dispiriting, let me quote the advice of the vice-chairman of the Conservative party, who was asked what he thought should be done. He said that the Conservatives would have to sack hundreds of candidates. He said there may be blood on the floor. Asked in the *Financial Times* what sort of candidates he wanted, he said—I think this is the most interesting comment in the entire debate—

"I am looking for people who are normal . . . in the broadest sense of the word".

Asked what that meant, he said that nine out of 10 Conservative candidates would have to be sacked. At his most optimistic, he is describing a party that is 10 per cent. normal. No wonder the Opposition Chief Whip is thinking of introducing a performance test for Conservative Members. The vice-chairman of the Conservative party whom I was quoting is the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Andrew Mackay). To paraphrase Lady Bracknell, to lose one out of 10 candidates is misfortune. To lose nine out of 10 is worse than carelessness.

What is the answer for the Conservative party? I have been given the benefit of an interview that took place since the election with Howard Flight. I also miss him from the House, as do Conservative Members. There will be general agreement that it was shabby treatment of him which lost him his candidature. He has given an interview that will not endear him to the leadership of the Conservative party, and which may make it quite difficult for him to get back at the next election. In the past few days he gave an interview to an obscure magazine, *Money Market*. It is difficult to get on to the official Conservative website now.

Howard Flight said there is no one left in the Tory party to carry the torch for business. He stated:

"The two Conservative MPs who were business heavies, myself and Archie Norman, are no longer there. If the party wants to be taken seriously again by the business community it must have more MPs with business experience . . . like me".

I do not underestimate the problems that the Conservatives face. They are trying to find a new leader—their fifth in opposition, a new system for finding a new leader—their third in opposition, and a new shadow Chancellor—their seventh in opposition. They are trying a new constitution, a new statement of values and new candidates, and some are even thinking of a new name, but if they do not change their basic ideology and ideas, there is very little hope left for the Conservative party.

In conclusion, I have some questions which the Conservative party should face up to, and which we faced up to as a party. I notice the shadow Chancellor gave an interview in December saying—this is very interesting, in the context of the debate going on in the Conservative party:

"I would be reluctant to give myself the moderniser label".

Even though we cannot ask for detailed answers on policy, it is fair to ask the fundamental economic questions—perhaps the shadow Work and Pensions Minister will respond—that any shadow Chancellor should be able to answer, as I am sure the former Chancellor would agree. On the share of public spending in our economy, does the shadow Chancellor hold to the election view that it should be reduced from 42 per cent. to 40 per cent.? Or does he support the former shadow Chancellor in the view that in theory it should be 35 per cent.? Or does he support Lord Saatchi in the view that it should go down to 30 per cent.? Or is his priority, like that of the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), to fund decent health and education services without taking too dogmatic a view of the size of public spending? In that case, the shadow Chancellor would have to say that his party was wrong in the last Parliament to vote against the national insurance changes to fund the NHS. What does the shadow Chancellor believe on that? I am happy to give way if he wants to clarify the policy, so we can have debates during the course of this Parliament.

On tax, does the shadow Chancellor believe the election tax cuts of £4 billion were right; should they be £12 billion; or does he agree with other shadow Ministers that tax cuts are a diversion from the priority to finance public services in their cases? On spending priorities, does he hold to the private patient plan and the private pupil plan, diverting money from the health and education services—local schools and local hospitals? Does he agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary that the party should privatise more, or with the hon. Member for Buckingham that such a policy could be seen as one for the few rather than for the many? On full employment, does he still hold to the view that the new deal should be abolished, or does he accept, as the Tory Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee did, that the new deal is useful in helping people to get back to work? Those are tests of modernisation that the Conservatives will have to meet.

There is a further question on Europe. Do the shadow Chancellor and the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions agree with the party's official policy on Europe—to renegotiate not just the current treaty, but the common fisheries policy, the overseas aid budget, the Amsterdam treaty and the Geneva protocol? That is the policy that the former Prime Minister, John Major, described as "crazy", "absurd" and "mad". Do they support those who want to leave, or do they agree with the former Conservative Chancellor that the Conservatives should accept that renegotiation will not happen?

Those questions have direct relevance for the future of our country, and the last one has relevance for our presidency of the EU. I would like to see an all party consensus behind business to push for economic reform in Europe, but that is impossible as long as there are Members who wish fundamentally to renegotiate our membership of the EU.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I am not giving way now.

Tomorrow we will publish our proposals for economic reform for our presidency, but I come to a final issue that is prominent in the Queen's Speech, and that is an economic, social and moral issue upon which I believe that there can be all party agreement—our shared responsibilities to Africa and to developing countries to move forward on debt relief, aid and the attainment of the millennium development goals, where Britain under the Prime Minister's leadership has a powerful role to play in the G8 and the UN special summit.

Yesterday, as we heard, European Ministers proposed to double aid by 2010, on the road to 0.7 per cent. for all the richest countries. But I hope that in our Finance Ministers meeting on 7 June in Luxembourg we can secure an even more extensive agreement that will give hope to Africa and to the developing countries. Every day that we delay, 30,000 children lose their lives. Every day that we delay, 100 million children do not go to school. On current rates of progress, we will not meet the millennium development goals for 150 years. We would like to front-load aid through an international finance facility. We would like a pilot facility for vaccination and immunisation, supported by the Gates Foundation. We believe that that could save 5 million lives over the next 10 years. We want an international trade agreement for free and fair trade, and we are moving forwards to agree a plan that could finally complete what started at Birmingham, and that is matching 100 per cent. bilateral debt relief with as much as 100 per cent. multilateral debt relief.

Many hon. Members have been in Africa and in developing countries and have seen what I have seen—the humiliation and agony of abject, relentless poverty; the humiliation of illiteracy and disease; children destined to die even before their life's journey has begun; mothers struggling to save the lives of infant sons and daughters and in doing so losing their own; millions of children denied education simply because their mothers and fathers cannot afford the fees; the great poverty and yet the great potential of these countries if we play a part in helping.

I believe that there can be all party support so that in 2005 Britain can become a beacon to the world in our crusade to tackle poverty in the poorest areas. Ours is a call to action to all men and women full of idealism, irrespective of political party. I want this generation to be remembered for seizing the opportunities, not for missing them.

This is a Queen's Speech that recognises our international responsibilities and our domestic responsibilities. Its themes are stability, not instability; equipping Britain for the future, not laissez-faire policies; renewed public services, not privatisation; and fairness. It is a Queen's Speech on the side of the people and I commend it to the House.

1.44 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at end add—

"but regret that the Gracious Speech contains no commitment to introduce legislation to reform the voting system and ensure that the composition of this House reflects the wishes of the electorate; further regret that the Gracious Speech proposes the introduction of a costly and ineffective system of compulsory identity cards instead of providing for more police on the street; further regret the absence of proposals to introduce a fair system of local income tax, related to the individual's ability to pay; deplore the absence of measures to ensure that the elderly receive free long term care; further regret the absence of proposals to end the complex means tested pensions system, which has deterred saving, has left many pensioners in poverty, and disproportionately disadvantages women; further regret the absence of legislation to reverse the punitive system of tuition fees and top up fees that mean students could begin their careers with mortgage level debts by 2010; further deplore the absence of specific measures to tackle the serious threat from climate change; and are concerned that there is still no commitment to introduce legislation to clarify the responsibility of the Prime Minister to Parliament, particularly in relation to the prerogative powers and the role of Parliament in matters of war and peace." *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman now has the Floor of the House, so those leaving should do so quietly and quickly.

Dr. Cable: I should like to extend a welcome to the new shadow Chancellor. He has enjoyed some good press over the last few days. I was particularly intrigued by the comments in *The Economist* this week coupling him with the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron). It says that the hon. Gentlemen are "posh and youthful" and

"are already the object of much spiteful comment from their colleagues."

It quotes one senior Conservative Member as saying:

"On top of our usual disagreements we are now riven with ageism and class hatred."

The shadow Chancellor will, I am sure, face many challenges from both myself and the Chancellor, but neither the Chancellor nor I have any intentions of trying to compete with him in respect of being either youthful or posh. However, we have one thing in common of which he may not be aware, because one of his ancestors, the hon. Ralph Osborne, was once the Liberal Member for my constituency, which was then called Middlesex. He was a dashing gentleman with a reputation for living dangerously, a trait that he has clearly passed on to his descendant, because we saw during the earlier part of the election campaign an example of how dangerously the hon. Gentleman lives. It occurred at the time of the episode to which the Chancellor has already referred when the affable and inoffensive Member for Arundel and South Downs, as he then was, was burnt at the stake for the heresy of saying that there were two different versions of the report on public spending, one of which had been filleted for its political sensitivity. The grand inquisitor, the leader of the Conservative party, was obviously not aware that a day later on the "Today" programme, the new shadow Chancellor had said almost exactly the same thing in almost the same words. I have the quote here for him. None the less, he escaped and has been promoted, and he is welcome.

I mention the James report because one of its key recommendations—this was in both the expurgated and the unexpurgated versions—was a severe cut in provisions for social housing. That may be one reason why he glossed over rather quickly the challenge to the Government on their new housing policy. I do not intend to gloss over it because this is clearly one of the Government's major new policy initiatives. It has not been dealt with in a way that is terribly courteous to hon.

[Dr. Cable]

Members; we have picked up what we know about it from the newspapers, but it is substantial and I shall try to address myself to it. It is superficially attractive—it deals with the problems of first-time buyers, about which we are all concerned and which led three parties to argue for lifting the stamp duty threshold; it promotes shared ownership, which Liberal Democrats are keen to encourage—but as far as I understand it, it is in many ways a very bad idea.

One of the characteristics of the Chancellor's period in office is that while he has an excellent record in respect of macro-economic management, he periodically comes up with what are frankly wacky ideas, worked out on the back of an envelope with very little detail. Some of us call to mind individual learning accounts, the private finance initiative for the London underground, film industry subsidies—between them they have cost the taxpayer well over £1 billion—and I suspect that this is another one.

Mark Tami: Before the hon. Gentleman moves off what he calls wacky ideas, could he tell us about the Liberal proposal on flat rate tax?

Dr. Cable: There is no proposal, but we have a completely open mind and a willingness to look at new ideas, which is what I am endeavouring to encourage. There may be something to learn from other European countries that are experimenting with this, but we do not have a proposal to that effect. We campaigned on the tax proposals in our manifesto.

On the basis of the information provided to us, there seem to be several serious problems with the housing proposals. Perhaps the Chancellor or one of his colleagues will intervene to put me right if I have got this wrong. The first is that it seems to be a very clumsy intervention in the housing market, which as we all know is volatile and characterised by a major bubble. None of us knows what will happen to house prices. I used to do forecasting for a living, and I have learned the hazards of trying to make forecasts. In one of its technical annexes, the Treasury itself predicts that prices will fall this year by 1 per cent. They may or may not, but if prices reflate—this proposal may help that process—a growing amount of Government subsidy will chase first-time buyers up the housing ladder.

The housing market could, however, collapse. Bodies such as the International Monetary Fund have predicted a very substantial and painful correction of 20 to 30 per cent.—who knows? If that were to happen, a large amount of taxpayers' money would be put at equity risk.

One detail that has already emerged is that the Government, in their partnership with the banks, will accept the first losses in any fall in the market. Why should the Council of Mortgage Lenders, which has always been cool on shared ownership, suddenly have developed an enthusiasm for it? The only possible reason is that the Government are accepting a substantial level of risk. As the Chancellor knows, one of my criticisms of him is that, in the five years since he failed to implement the findings of the Cruickshank report on bank profits, the banks have run rings around the Treasury. I suspect that this is yet another case in which that will happen.

There is a second criticism of the proposals as they have emerged. Why on earth are the Government trying to reinvent the wheel? Shared ownership is a complex and specialised business. A great deal of knowledge about it resides in housing associations and the Housing Corporation, which, as I understand it, the Government propose to bypass in their entirety.

A good report sits in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Housing Corporation, called "Shared ownership models that work". I should declare an interest, in that it was written by my wife, Rachel. It is one of several reports suggesting that shared ownership is a complex process and that we must learn from the mistakes as well as the successes. But if the Government's proposal is, as has been announced in the press, to bypass completely the existing institutions with a new, centralised Treasury-driven initiative, it will not work.

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that his party would do absolutely nothing for first-time buyers and allow free market forces to prevail?

Dr. Cable: No, I am not suggesting that at all. The Government propose to spend a lot of money on this initiative, and there are different—and, I suggest, better—ways of spending it. If the Government were to work through housing associations and local authorities, rather than through a centralised initiative, the fundamental difference would quickly emerge between demand for housing as determined by applicants to banks, and housing need as determined by overcrowding and homelessness, for example. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones) said in an intervention, the real problem is the chronic shortage of social rented housing. This initiative neglects that point completely.

Although this initiative addresses issues of demand, it does nothing at all about supply. The Chancellor mentioned earlier a paper produced by the ODPM on making available public sector land, which is clearly a sensible thing to do as there is a lot of surplus land. There may have been a misprint, but the version of the statement that I read stated that the first step in making that public land available would liberate land for 400 houses; not 4,000 or 40,000, but 400. We have talked about freeing up public sector land for eight years, and little has been done—there is talk but little delivery. I wait to hear more about the proposal, but unless it is very different from its description in the press, it promises to be a major turkey, rather than a major success story.

I have always acknowledged, as I did in my introductory remarks, that the Government have a successful record in macro-economics. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research—like the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it is a genuine and impartial judge of economic performance—described the Chancellor's record as very satisfactory so far. I do not dissent from that and it is a good point of departure, but the problem is, where do we go from here? There clearly are problems ahead.

I am reluctant to indulge in forecasting, but there are a series of problems connected with the failing demand in the retail market, which is associated with personal

debt. There are growing difficulties in employment: despite low levels of unemployment, unemployment has risen for three successive months. There are also serious problems in manufacturing: output fell by 2 per cent. in March, and Britain now has one of the worst manufacturing records in recent years, even compared with Germany and Japan, which have had their problems.

The Chancellor has said in the past that we had such problems—a slow-down—back in 2001, but we coped with them because we had the right institutions in place. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the Government's freedom of manoeuvre is narrowing considerably. As he knows, there is little scope for the Bank of England to cut interest rates because inflation is at the top end of the range given to it. Inflation is there for several reasons, the most important of which is probably the world price of oil, which may go much higher. There are fundamental problems of capacity shortage, rising demand from China and the United States, and political instability, which may get worse. If that happens, the Bank will be bound to respond to inflationary pressures by putting up, not cutting, interest rates.

There is little scope for relief from private investment, because the rate of return in manufacturing has fallen since 1997 from 12 per cent. to 6 per cent. There is little confidence or cash flow to generate private investment. The Government have no scope for increasing the growth of current public spending, because of the Chancellor's potential problems—they may not be actual problems yet—with the golden rule.

The one possibility left is the scope for increasing public investment, which I believe he plans to increase next year by 23 per cent. He has the scope to do so because the Government balance sheet is still healthy. Its healthiness is now under question, however. If the Office for National Statistics is to be believed, a lot of Government private finance initiative debt may have to be reclassified, taking the Chancellor near to his 40 per cent. limit. In the light of all that, the Government's freedom for manoeuvre may be greatly limited.

John Robertson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the management of the economy in the past eight years has been better than at any other time in the past 100 years? Does he accept that we have low unemployment, which is at a level not seen since way back in the early '60s? For the past eight years, we have heard all the doom-and-gloom statements about how bad the economy is, but does he accept that every time anybody has challenged the Chancellor's figures, they have been proven wrong?

Dr. Cable: I graciously accepted at the beginning of my remarks that the record was good; I am not disputing that. I shall be equally gracious in the other direction by pointing out that this trend started before the Government came into office, and that they have had a favourable international environment. However, the hon. Gentleman is of course right: the Government have a good track record in many respects.

A few days ago, the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), made a perceptive point that at the time seemed witty and wise. He said that eventually, all Labour Chancellors run out of money. I reflected on that, and it struck me as being in fact the opposite of the truth. If one looks back in Labour history, Philip Snowden, Stafford Cripps, Gaitskell, Roy Jenkins and Healey all faced economic difficulties and were forced into an extremely austere approach to public spending, often implementing savage cuts, including cuts in public sector pay. I suspect that last week's comments from the Chancellor at the Trades Union Congress may have been a first indication of the discipline that will have to be exercised in that direction.

Were the Chancellor to intervene, he would doubtless say, "These things are all true, but what I have put in place—unlike my predecessors—is a good framework for policy." That is right. We now have 70 per cent. of a good framework for macro-economic policy.

This week, the *Financial Times*, which is not politically inspired and which has been very complimentary about the Chancellor's economic record, pointed out that fiscal policy assessment is not independent. We need a genuinely independent element in the assessment of not only the Government's assumptions, but what stage of the economic cycle we happen to be in. We need a fully independent Office for National Statistics, so that sensitive decisions concerning the classification of debt are handled transparently and honestly. Why do the Government not finish the job and create a proper framework for macro-economic management?

The Government must address several big issues that are coming through the pipeline. In the Chancellor's speech to the CBI last week, he hinted at the need for a U-turn on regulation, and some good ideas are emerging on how to institute a deregulatory process. What is missing—perhaps it will emerge—is a proper process, so that every new regulation is subject to the discipline of a proper and independent regulatory impact assessment and has sunset clauses built into it?

The Chancellor must also establish credibility on the deregulatory front by seeing off the problem created by the working time directive. If the problem is not solved, his credibility on deregulation will be in shreds. His position is vulnerable, because he faces the political equivalent of a penalty shoot-out in the Council of Ministers. In the national interest, we hope that he succeeds, but the outcome is not clear.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a new approach by the Government to regulation would be welcome. Given that it is now six years since the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for North Tyneside (Stephen Byers)—who is admittedly not a friend of the Chancellor but who was the Chancellor's colleague in the Government at that time—announced his conversion to the use of sunset clauses in legislation in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, does the hon. Gentleman think that we are at least entitled to an explanation as to why sunset clauses have not materialised in any significant form in Government legislation in the intervening six years?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman has pursued that cause in his eight years in the House. He is right that, despite the rhetoric, very little has happened, and I support his view on the matter.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Is it not important to differentiate between protective regulations, such as those concerned with health and safety and the national minimum wage, and regulations which should be consolidated because they are inefficient—for example, the election rules which many hon. Members will recently have experienced? Will the hon. Gentleman distinguish between those two kinds of regulations? Surely the Liberal Democrats are not saying that they are against protective regulations such as the national minimum wage.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Lady knows that the whole argument is about how regulation is framed. I shall pursue the example of the working time directive, on which the Government are now in a very difficult position. Last week, Brendan Barber, the TUC general secretary, wrote a thoughtful article in which he pointed out that the trade unions might well have come on board on the working time directive if the Government had confronted at an earlier stage the crucial distinction between workers who genuinely want to work long hours because that is their lifestyle preference and workers who are coerced into working long hours by their employers. If the system of regulation had captured that distinction, no problems would have occurred. The issue is not about, as the hon. Lady put it, "protective regulations"; it is about the how regulations are phrased. The matter must be addressed in a market-friendly manner, which relates to the key issue of the working time directive.

At Prime Minister's questions, my party leader touched on another big theme, pensions, about which enough has been said not to pursue it in great detail. However, a tension clearly exists between whether we address pensioner poverty through large-scale means-testing, which is the Chancellor's preference and which is becoming unsustainable because of the scale of the testing and the disincentive effects that have been created, or whether we pursue it in another way. We have advanced the idea of a citizen's pension for men and women that is above the means-tested level, at least for older pensioners. We must debate the matter, but we cannot do so until the Government give a clear message on how they want pension policy to evolve.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The Liberal Democrat amendment regrets

"the absence of proposals to introduce . . . local income tax".

Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to end press speculation to the contrary by confirming that local income tax remains Liberal Democrat party policy?

Dr. Cable: Yes; it most certainly does, and I am happy to refute any suggestion to the contrary. The hon. Gentleman must have foresight, because I was about to conclude on that point, which I shall approach in the context of the slightly wider question of social justice.

Mr. Salmond: I believe in local income tax, but how does the hon. Gentleman reconcile the concept of a local income tax with the concept of a flat tax?

Dr. Cable: Local income tax is a flat tax, so I cannot see the point of the intervention. Local income tax might be right or wrong, but it is certainly flat.

I have always acknowledged the Chancellor's pursuit of his objective of a fairer system over the past eight years. One of the problems is that all measures of pre-tax income and post-tax income show that income inequality is not significantly better—indeed, it may be worse—than it was in earlier periods. We need to debate the ONS numbers on the share of income paid in tax by different income groups, but, for some reason, the release of those figures has been postponed until next month. The available evidence suggests that the overall tax system in this country is highly regressive, which completely undermines the Chancellor's pursuit of social justice through taxation and tax credits. That is why Liberal Democrat Members continue to believe that income-based local taxation based on ability to pay is the way to proceed, and we will continue to argue that case. We await the Government's proposals with interest, because we understand that they to some extent converge with our point of view.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that Mr. Speaker has placed a 10-minute limit on all speeches by Back Benchers and that it applies from now on.

2.7 pm

Mr. Paul Murphy (Torfaen) (Lab): I know that a number of maiden speeches will be made in this Chamber this afternoon. Indeed, I feel as if I am making my maiden speech, because it is 17 years since I spoke from the Back Benches.

When I made my maiden speech, I talked about unemployment in my constituency. In 1987, there were 6,000 unemployed people in my constituency. Today, the figure is 1,000, which means that 2.2 per cent. of people in my south Wales constituency are unemployed. That is almost full employment. The dramatic transformation of our economy over the past eight years in particular has meant that youth unemployment, for example, has dramatically reduced in all our constituencies. In my constituency today, there are only 45 long-term unemployed young people. Some 2,000 people have used the new deal, 1,000 of whom have found jobs. I am sure that all hon. Members understand that their own local economies have changed beyond recognition, too.

Helped by the dynamic economic development policies of my local authority, my constituency, which was based on coal, steel and heavy engineering, now relies on a host of different types of employers. Those employers range from light engineering to business to traditional employers such as the brake manufacturer TRW, which employs some 800 people, to Big Pit in Blaenafon, which employs people in the tourist industry at a world heritage site. That diversity of our economy owes a very great deal to the policies of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer under the Government of whom I was proud to be a member for eight years.

Similarly, in Wales generally we have had unparalleled resources going into our public services. They have come because, as my right hon. Friend said earlier in his very good speech, we were able to release public funds because we were paying less and less in unemployment benefits. As a result, unprecedented and

unparalleled levels of public resources are going into public services in Wales, particularly into our health service. We were able to obtain European objective 1 status for Wales, which has meant that Wales has become more entrepreneurial and more skills and industries have developed.

We have seen a great partnership between the Labour Government here in Westminster and the National Assembly in Cardiff in dealing with the question of our pensioners. In Wales, the transport policies of the Assembly mean that a pensioner can travel free the length and breadth of the Principality. Added to that are our own policies of free television licences for over-75s, help with council tax bills, and winter fuel payments; 30,000 of my constituents are benefiting from the latter.

Of course, more needs to be done—we acknowledge that. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor spoke about the importance of helping young people with getting on to the housing ladder, for example. In the autumn, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will be looking at the extremely important report on the way in which pensions develop in the years ahead.

As well as that, economic change has been formidable in Northern Ireland. I had the very great privilege of being a Minister and a Secretary of State there for nearly five years, and I cannot begin to thank the people of Northern Ireland—Protestant, Catholic and those of no persuasion—for the warmth, generosity and hospitality that they gave me over those years. They have experienced a transformation in their economy that is beyond belief. Unemployment in Northern Ireland now stands at 4.7 per cent. compared with nearly 13 per cent. in 1993—that is down from 89,000 claimants to 37,000. Fifty per cent. of young people in Northern Ireland now go on to higher education of some form or another. New industries are developing. European aid has proved invaluable, as in the Republic, and a new spirit of enterprise is growing. Tourism is flourishing. More people now visit Northern Ireland than live there—2 million people visited last year compared with 1.7 million residents. Although there are of course areas of deprivation, the face of Northern Ireland has changed dramatically for the better.

I believe that the Good Friday agreement and the peace process have brought that about, coupled with the policies of a Labour Government who have encouraged investment from all over the world, especially from the United States and the European Union. As result, people are staying and living in Northern Ireland to create new wealth, which they did not do in the past. When devolution was up and running, local industry could be encouraged and government was more accessible and accountable to the people there. Devolution certainly helped the local economy. That is why the restoration of the Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland is vital for the economic future of the Province. No one in that place wants to return to the days of the troubles. Everyone wants economic progress, and most people realise that a continued stalemate cannot be good for Northern Ireland's economic future.

I wish my successor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), the very best in his new role as Secretary of State, and I urge all the parties in Northern Ireland to continue to try to find a solution to the impasse and to create the confidence between parties to come to an agreement. For that to happen, all paramilitary groups, especially the IRA, must decommission their weapons and abandon criminal and paramilitary activity. When that happens, Northern Ireland, with a restored and vibrant local democracy, can look forward to a prosperous, peaceful and politically stable future.

2.14 pm

Mrs. Nadine Dorries (Mid-Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. As I am the first to do so today, I commend all those who went before me yesterday and the day before.

I was recently elected as the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire, replacing Jonathan Sayeed. Jonathan was an extremely courteous man who helped countless constituents with individual problems during his time as their MP. On my recent arrival at the House, one hon. Member informed me that every Member of this House had visited my constituency on many occasions. That left me rather perplexed until I realised that he was referring to the M1, which runs through my constituency from junctions 12 to 13. On that basis, most of the population has visited my constituency without having any idea of what Mid-Bedfordshire is like.

My constituency resembles a gently rolling patchwork quilt of arable green and yellow, and in the folds lie Norman churches, market towns and small villages. Late summer nights will see the combine harvesters working by their headlights and early mornings will see market gardeners packing up their produce and heading to London to the various markets. On his way, the market gardener would pass Ampthill, an historic town, and Woburn abbey, the seat of the Duke of Bedford. The traditional heart of the constituency is largely rural, yet in recent years it has become a recognised centre for high-tech research and development, IT and distribution—obviously due to its easy access to the M1. We are also home to the prestigious Cranfield university.

One noteworthy resident of Mid-Bedfordshire was John Bunyan, who was born in Elstow. Unfortunately, as a young man he found himself on the wrong side of the law. He was arrested while hiding up an oak tree in Harlington and dispatched to Bedford jail. Jails in those days held some very inspiring characters, because it was there that he wrote "Pilgrim's Progress". If the hon. Member for Bedford (Patrick Hall), who sits on the Labour Benches, ever finds himself across the border in my constituency, I can assure him that the same fate will not await him—as long as I know that he is coming beforehand, anyway.

People in Mid-Bedfordshire have an extraordinary capacity for acceptance and change. They accepted me into this idyllic rural constituency, yet I have spent the largest part of my life on a Liverpool council estate. Until now, my only claim to fame has been that my grandfather was one of the founders of Everton football club. In my family, supporting the blue team runs in the genes. However, I am afraid that that applies only to politics. As many of my constituents know, I am an avid Liverpool supporter—I have company on a number of Benches—and cannot make my maiden speech today without wishing the team well tonight.

[Mrs. Nadine Dorries]

One could be forgiven for thinking that all is well in Mid-Bedfordshire, because I have painted a fairly idyllic picture, but I am afraid that that is not the case. Many of the residents who accepted me did so because they too came from large towns such as Newcastle, Manchester, London and Liverpool. They chose to live there, as I have, because they wanted to wake up to the sound of birdsong rather than the incessant hum of traffic or, unfortunately, the sound of the bulldozer. Therein lies the rub. The face of my constituency is under threat from over-development. I fail to see why, in a country with a population as large and static, we need to develop green fields rather than existing urban areas that need regeneration. In fact, only this morning the residents of Islington were asking on television for new houses to be built in Islington, not 50 miles away in Mid-Bedfordshire.

A great challenge faces the Government, and it requires brave decisions from them. They should encourage economic activity in areas where there is surplus housing or where housing demands are less intense, and develop those areas. I am reminded of Liverpool, the city of my birth. It is bit like a size 8 woman in a size 12 frock because so many people have left over the years. Developing greenfield sites means that such towns and cities are not getting the urban regeneration that they need, and if we meet that ambition, we will be preserving the countryside. There is certainly no need to impoverish the environment and amenity of people in Mid-Bedfordshire and other rural counties for the sake of short-sighted and short-term policies. The price of indiscriminate development on the green fields of Mid-Bedfordshire is to leave much of urban Britain unregenerated.

Children with special needs also have a tough time in my constituency. Mid-Bedfordshire has a high number of exclusions and, on closer examination of the figures, many of them are of children with special needs—high-level autism and Asperger's syndrome. Those children are labelled as disruptive because they cannot swim in the slipstream of the national curriculum. They do not have the necessary social and interpersonal skills to communicate, learn, concentrate or even belong, and, unfortunately, the existing policy of inclusion exacerbates the situation. Because there are few specialist schools, many of those children's most serious problems are compounded and their parents are on the edge of despair.

During my time as the MP for Mid-Bedfordshire, I will, with Mr. Speaker's indulgence, use the House to highlight the concerns of my constituents and what matters to them most. My family's route from the council estate on which we lived was the right-to-buy programme, which was introduced by Margaret Thatcher. The policy brought hope, inspiration and achievement to a generation of people to whom social progress had been a distant dream. During weeks of campaigning, I made promises to my constituents to speak up for those who want to buy their own council houses and follow their dreams for their children. It is a great sadness to me that my father is not alive to witness today.

I promise to be a voice for the family and to stand up for mothers who wish to stay at home and raise their children but feel voiceless and unworthy in such a career-oriented society, when raising the children of tomorrow's society is the most worthy job of all. I promise to speak up for the large farming community in Mid-Bedfordshire, which is battling to come to terms with legislation being heaped upon it. Most of all, I promise to do my best and to base everything that I do on integrity. I know that people will be able to judge my actions and performance in that light, and I hope that, with the help of the House and my colleagues, I will succeed. I will always do my best for the people of Mid-Bedfordshire, the place that I now call home.

2.22 pm

Ms Barbara Keeley (Worsley) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries) on an excellent maiden speech. I also wish to express my gratitude to established Members of Parliament of all parties and to the staff of the House, whose advice and kindness is helping me and other new Members to find our feet.

The constituency of Worsley contains wards in both Salford and Wigan metropolitan boroughs. Although covering two local authority areas is a complex matter, I am grateful for the support of my right hon. and hon. Friends in neighbouring constituencies in those two boroughs—I want to represent the people of Worsley as well as I know that they represent their constituents.

I pay tribute to the 22 years of service in this House of my predecessor Terry Lewis. Many hon. Members have told me that they liked and respected Terry, and I understand that a typical picture is of him sitting on the Benches below the Gangway vying with his hon. Friends to intervene during debates with Conservatives. I wish Terry well in his retirement after so many years as Worsley's Member of Parliament.

Manufacturing, mining, cotton and weaving were historically Worsley's key industries. That industrial heritage is still evident in our canals and landmark buildings. An important event in Worsley's history was the building of the Bridgewater canal in the 18th century by the third Duke of Bridgewater—the famous canal duke. It was built to take coal from Worsley to Manchester and was later extended to the River Mersey at Runcorn, linking Manchester and Liverpool by waterway. The canal was regarded as an 18th century masterpiece. Nowadays it is an attraction for visitors, particularly the canal basin with its distinctive orange-coloured water.

Coal mining started in the Worsley area in the 14th century, initially from open-cast mines. Deep mining of coal developed in a number of local pits, but production ceased more than 30 years ago. At Astley Green, the pit winding gear acts as a local landmark—the only surviving pithead in Lancashire. It is being developed by volunteers as a museum and heritage centre. However, mining is in Worsley's future as well as its past. UK Coal has plans for new open-cast mining at the Cutacre site. Having researched the effects of open-cast mining on local communities in Yorkshire and Scotland, I have many concerns about that development, and I will campaign to ensure that people in Little Hulton, Walkden, Shakerley and Tyldesley do not suffer unduly from mining activity over the next few years.

Worsley has always played a key part in providing important transport links between the region's cities and towns, including the Roman road that linked the forts at Manchester and Wigan, the Bridgewater canal, Stephenson's Manchester to Liverpool railway, and now the M60 and the east Lancashire road. Such transport links are vital, but my constituents suffer traffic congestion and noise pollution from them. Indeed, traffic congestion at the Worsley interchange is so bad that there are daily traffic reports about it on local radio. The accident rate on the east Lancashire road also causes concern. Therefore, I pledge to make highway safety, traffic congestion and the need for improved public transport some of the key priorities on which I will campaign for change.

Worsley is a constituency of great contrasts. Although the Worsley ward has many properties selling at over a million pounds, a few miles away, Little Hulton ward is the second most deprived ward in Salford, and the 138th most deprived in the UK. The ward suffered greatly under 18 Tory years, and measures by the Labour Government of the past eight years are at last starting to make a difference. I hope that my career experience will help me to represent such a diverse area.

Worsley no longer has the mining jobs or a large number of the manufacturing jobs that it had in earlier decades. However, we have a large number of public sector staff, because the national health service and the two local authorities are the biggest local employers. We also have many jobs in service industries and small businesses. My background in some ways mirrors that mix. In my early career, I worked in the IT industry as a systems engineering manager working with the type of small businesses that we have in Worsley, and which I am sure will be assisted by the extra help for small businesses mentioned earlier by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. I decided that my heart was more with the values of the public and voluntary sectors, and I became a self-employed adviser working on community regeneration projects. I learned a great deal about the need for partnership working and how to listen to people from community organisations.

I hope to use that experience to support community regeneration initiatives in my constituency, for example, in communities such as Higher Folds, where the community centre and the tenants' and residents' association have an understanding of what local people need. Government funding channelled through the Coalfields Regeneration Trust can help to develop that former coalfield community, but people such as Jackie Farrington and Eileen Waldron from such local organisations can point to what the community needs.

I also want new sport and leisure facilities to develop, particularly for young people. However, even the best facilities need the commitment of people such as Mavis Bent and Gwyn Pierce, who run the Tyldesley swimming and water polo club, which was established in 1876 and now has scores of volunteer coaches and 400 young members. Such voluntary organisations are vital because our communities need to be brought together. I want the towns and estates in Worsley to have the best shared community life we can develop, as well as improved services and facilities.

Since 2001, I have worked nationally on policy issues related to carers. Although my work commitments have changed, carers' issues will always remain important to me. There are many thousands of unpaid carers in my constituency, including some 2,000 people who care for more than 50 hours a week. Our health and social care services benefit greatly from the work of those unpaid carers. I hope that understanding the national policy issues for carers will help me to improve support for carers in my constituency. Carers week starts on 13 June, and the carers centres in Wigan and Salford will work to ensure that many more people understand the issues experienced by carers and help to improve the quality of their lives.

As we heard earlier, most new Members' speeches have touched on the success or strengths of a local sports team, but doing that would be hazardous for me. Some of my constituents support Manchester United, others support Bolton Wanderers, while some even support Manchester City, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Paul Goggins). Many people support Salford City Reds or Leigh or Wigan's rugby league teams. However, rather than siding with any one local club, I wish all the very best to the England women's football squad, which will soon embark on the UEFA European women's championship, which kicks off in Manchester on 5 June. Kay Hawke, a member of the England under-21 squad, comes from Walkden in my constituency and has done a great deal for sports development with young people. I wish the England women's team all the best in that championship and I hope that Kay continues her progress to the senior squad.

I am exceedingly proud to be the first woman MP to represent Worsley constituency and part of the Wigan borough. I thank the people of Worsley for the trust that they have shown in me, and I also thank the House for listening to me today.

2.30 pm

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): I have had no difficulty whatsoever listening to the hon. Member for Worsley (Ms Keeley). She paid a very graceful tribute to her predecessor, and she will be a worthy voice for the people of Lancashire. She spoke with knowledge and a great deal of sincerity about the various issues facing her constituency, and I hope that we hear a good deal more from her very soon.

We have also heard the very competent and confident maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries), who described the real threat of over-development in her constituency. Over-development is also a threat in my constituency and many others. She also spoke warmly about all sorts of different issues facing Mid-Bedfordshire, including education and family matters. We are very lucky to have these two new Members to help us with our debates, and I suspect that some of us older Members will need to look to our laurels if we are to speak as well as they do.

I should like to add one final tribute. We are lucky to have in the Chamber the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), a man of huge authority and distinction. He has given great service to the country, not least to Northern Ireland, and the points that he made were very valuable.

I should like to speak briefly about pensions, the most important issue facing this country at the moment. We need not only to encourage people to set aside money for

[Mr. James Arbuthnot]

their old age, but to ensure that our older people live in dignity and with the kind of worthwhile lifestyle that is now under threat. We all know the background: our pensions are in crisis. People are living longer and saving less: this represents a demographic time bomb, and I am afraid that the Government's £500 million-a-year raid on pension funds did not help. There have also been uncertainties in the stock market, and I have to say that the mis-selling of pensions in the 1990s did not help either. The Conservative Government did their utmost to sort that out, however, and I think that we were successful. I do not believe that the Government's heavy reliance on means-testing is the answer. The pension credit route down which the Government are going will make matters worse, as Adair Turner said at the weekend.

We need to encourage older people to stay in the work force, and to enable them to get back into it if they lose their job. Adair Turner said at the weekend that graduates might well have to work until they are 70. On Monday, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that they would not. We need some kind of policy on this, and I hope that the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will work on that. Why does pensions policy always need to be sorted out? Why has it not already been sorted out? Working longer must be part of the answer to the pensions crisis that we face.

In 2002, there were 20 million people over the age of 50. By 2031, there are likely to be 27 million such people. There will therefore be more people on pensions and fewer people in the work force to support them. The worry is also that those people in the work force could lose their jobs—we have recently had the crises at Rover, Marconi and Colgate. People who lose their job when they are in their 40s and 50s are usually not prepared for it; it comes as a dreadful shock to them. They also find it harder to re-enter the work force, and they know that there is a real possibility that they will be discriminated against by employers. Ninety per cent. of older people believe that they will face discrimination in the work force, and in 2002, a MORI poll showed that ageism was the most common form of discrimination that we face.

Angela Eagle: May I assume that the right hon. Gentleman is an enthusiastic supporter of the European directive that will outlaw age discrimination in the UK work force by 2006, and that he will assist us in bringing it into being rather than regarding it as a piece of European regulation that needs to be abolished?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Yes.

The Government have done a number of different things to try to help older people. For example, they have introduced the new deal 50-plus and spent about £800 million on trying to help older people to get work. The Public Accounts Committee recently produced a report entitled "Welfare to work: tackling the barriers to the employment of older people", in which the Committee says that the new deal 50-plus has not been subject to "proper evaluation".

We have also seen from the evidence given to the Committee that, although the Government initially encouraged the Age Positive campaign, they have issued only 150,000 leaflets to support it. The permanent secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions said that 150,000 leaflets had been sent out over five years. When asked how many employers there were in this country, however, he said that he was not quite sure, but he thought that there were several million. It was not surprising, therefore, that one of the members of the Committee said:

"You're not making a very intensive effort, are you?"

More than 1 million people over the age of 50 are looking for work at the moment. I would have thought that one of the things that they could be doing was helping to distribute leaflets to employers to show how damaging age discrimination is.

As the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) has pointed out, a directive is likely to make age discrimination illegal next year. However, legislation is not the only factor that will encourage older people to get back into work. Another thing that needs to change is the attitude of employers and employees. We need vigorous support for the removal of ageism, and a serious public awareness campaign that will bring about a complete change of attitude towards older workers in every sector, every industry and every aspect of life.

Of course there are advantages in having a youthful work force. However, there are also huge advantages in the values that experience and wisdom can bring to a work force. These include improved staff retention, higher staff morale, fewer short-term absences, higher productivity, and a wider range of skills and experience. It is not true that older people are resistant to technology or to change, as most people think. It is essential to change the stereotypes that deprive us of the value that older people can bring to the work force.

Research shows that older and younger workers respond to training and are equally capable of development. We need to be able to identify any skills that are lacking, and to provide training to suit the older student. We also need to make older workers who are unemployed aware that they can work, and that interesting work is open to them, whether full-time, part-time or self-employed work. We need to ensure that the support given to them by the state is effective, and not just public money poorly spent. We must not limit that support to those claiming state benefits. Many people, particularly in that age group, believe that it is wrong to depend on the state, yet they often need the state's help to return to work.

The Public Accounts Committee has made some valuable specific recommendations, all of which I hope the Government will take fully on board. It recommends proper skills assessments, advisers of a similar age, continuity of advisers, and real practical help.

The key is giving older people self-confidence—confidence that they can work, and that their skills and experience will be welcomed. All too often, older people find it harder and harder even to admit that they are unemployed, because it deprives them of the respect to which they feel entitled. They are right to feel entitled to it, because they have a great deal to offer us all.

2.40 pm

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Let me begin by congratulating my fellow "maidens" who are present today on breaking their duck. I also thank the staff of

the House, who have helped every one of us new starters with a large degree of patience and professionalism. They really have helped us all to get somewhere near up to speed during the past few weeks.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, John McWilliam—a man who gave 26 years of sterling service to the House, and a man for whom those who really knew him in this place had nothing but the utmost respect. John acted as Deputy Speaker, particularly in Westminster Hall. He may not have been one of Parliament's flamboyant types, but he was one of those people whom every successful organisation needs: a man who got things done quietly, efficiently and positively. I can only add my name to the long list of those whom John has helped, here in Westminster and back home in the glorious part of the world that is the Blaydon constituency.

Most people recognise Blaydon when they are told "Yes, that is where the races were held", and some even know the date, 9 June 1862, from the first verse of the Geordie national anthem. But my constituency consists of much more than Blaydon town. Few people realise that the constituency stretches for many miles, through some of Britain's most beautiful countryside. It encompasses towns and villages with a rich history and diversity all their own. That diversity has enabled it to develop into the place where red kites have been reintroduced into the wild, right next to the biggest shopping centre in Europe, while at the entrance to the constituency is the symbol of the renaissance of the north-east, the angel of the north.

Our part of the world was the cradle of the industrial revolution. We dug the coal, we built the railways, we made the steel. We developed communities that had great self-belief. We had our own welfare state before Beveridge was all out of short pants. We built houses, sports clubs and libraries. We encouraged people to take up musical instruments, and we learnt to care for one another when no one else would. Above all, we became what we are today: an area whose roots are embedded in the world of hard work—from chemicals to coal mining, from farming to forestry, from building earth movers to building ships.

Like many other parts of the country, we are privileged to have thousands of public sector workers living and working in Blaydon. Contrary to the view of far too many in the House, these people are not bowler-hatted bureaucrats counting beans or shuffling papers; they are the glue that holds our society together. They are the people who tidy up when things go wrong in our lives—when our parents cannot take care of themselves, when our child goes off the way, when we are ill, when our house is on fire, when our whole life is in danger of falling around us—and who do all the thousands of other things that public servants do day in, day out, 365 nights and days of the year.

I am massively proud that I, like my comrade and hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Anne Moffat), had the great honour to represent well over 1 million of those people as president of Unison, "the" public-sector union. I am proud of the many positive things that my union, working in conjunction with my Government, helped to make real for working people in this country. I shall mention just two.

The first is the national minimum wage. Despite howls of protest around the House, my party introduced it, albeit nearly two decades after my union began the campaign. Never again will we see job advertisements for security guards at £1.75 an hour—and don't forget to bring your own dog!

The other part of my work in Unison that makes me most proud is the role that we played in the peace process in Northern Ireland. Unison was one of the first cross-community bodies to make a public declaration in favour of the Good Friday agreement, and many of my Irish colleagues in Unison took real risks for peace. Many of us talk willy-nilly about life-and-death issues, but we should never forget that, for far too long, that is exactly what many of our people in Northern Ireland faced. If there is one thing on which we can all agree in the House, surely it is that we must all work towards a real lasting peace, based on respect for each other's beliefs and enshrined in real democracy.

As I said earlier, the people of Blaydon are no strangers to hard work and, sadly, hard times. The devastation caused by the ideological attacks on our communities in the 1980s left ingrained in my people a strong belief in one thing: they never want to see the return of a Conservative Government. As a coal miner who lost his job, his trade, his community and part of his culture, I could not agree more. Never again should unemployment be used as a tool of public policy. Never again should a Government be allowed to destroy an industry and a key part of our nation's natural resources just to prove a political point. And never again should we allow our communities to be run down, ignored or forgotten.

The truth is that we are all in this together. In a global economy, we cannot afford to be anything other than united. That is why the people of the Blaydon constituency particularly welcome my party's commitment to bring full employment to the north-east. It is by no means an easy objective, but it is one that I intend to chase up constantly with those on the Government Front Bench. I am greedy. I do not just want jobs for people in the north; I want the best jobs for people in the north. I want good jobs, I want high-skill, high-quality, secure jobs, and I want jobs based on good employment rights. That is why I will encourage the Government to implement in full—as promised in the manifesto—the so-called Warwick agreement, which addresses some of the massive shortcomings affecting people at work that have developed over the past 25 years.

The people of Blaydon deserve to work in safe, healthy workplaces. They deserve to be paid a decent, legally binding wage. They deserve to take well-earned holiday breaks, again guaranteed by law. They deserve the right to be represented by skilled trade union officials. They deserve to be able to take time off to help bind their families together in every possible way. They deserve, and I will demand, that the Government intervene to protect their jobs whenever and wherever necessary.

I am immensely proud and honoured to be the representative of the people of Blaydon and its surrounding communities. I want to end by referring to one of those communities, the former mining village of Chopwell—a village whose pride in its socialist roots is personified in a miners' banner featuring Keir Hardie, Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. Written on the banner are these words:

"We take up the task eternal, the burden and the lessons."

[Mr. David Anderson]

To me, that task is to ensure that the House delivers a world in which people are able to live in dignity, security and peace. The burden is one that we should all relish, and the lesson that we have learnt is that the best way in which to do that is to reject the failed policies of the 1980s and 1990s and support a programme based on democratic socialism—which, in their wisdom, the people of Blaydon have chosen to do yet again.

I thank you and the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my speech today. I look forward to many future opportunities to play my part in the House on behalf of the great people throughout the Blaydon constituency.

2.48 pm

Mr. Brian Binley (Northampton, South) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) on a fine and fighting maiden speech. I can tell him that I am a descendant of a long line of operatives working in the Northamptonshire shoe industry. I can convey some optimism to him, based on the fact that the shopmates of Raunds were the forerunners of the Jarrow marchers, but since then they have moved on a little. Now they see some brighter plains, based in many respects on the work done by the Government of Margaret Thatcher. I pay tribute to her, and I pass that optimism on to the hon. Gentleman.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech during this debate. During the election I promised the people of Northampton, South that I would be as active in pursuing their interests in the House as I had been as a member of Northamptonshire county council, so I am grateful to have this opportunity at this juncture.

I rise to speak in the Chamber as a relatively elderly new entrant, which will, I hope, gain me sympathy and understanding both from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and from hon. Members. One of the joys of being able to look back over a full number of years is that if we play our cards right, we build up a store of friendship that serves us well in our demise. I am delighted to have reacquainted myself with some very friendly faces in and around the House over recent days. I am also delighted to have reacquainted myself with a rather younger friendly face on the Labour Benches, who reminds me of the immense good that we can do when we put aside our political differences and concentrate on the matters that we mutually agree upon. I refer to the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Watson), whose father was the Labour agent in Kidderminster when I was Conservative agent in the 1970s. The hon. Gentleman's father and I identified much common ground, which we worked upon together in the interests of the people of that constituency. It was a practical lesson in political action that I have never forgotten. Consequently, I am grateful for this opportunity to pay tribute to a good friend who was also a very pragmatic and caring political activist.

That leads me to my predecessor in Northampton, South, Mr. Tony Clarke, who is also a caring political activist who served his constituency well as an MP for eight years. The dedication that he displayed to his constituents was exemplary and was commented upon to me often during the election. It gives me pleasure to pay tribute to him in this Chamber.

Tony Clarke and I worked together on a number of local projects over the three years that I was a parliamentary candidate, and I thank him for his input and friendship. Indeed, such an attitude reflects much that is positive about the people whom I now represent. They are hard-working people who have their roots firmly planted in agriculture in a county famed for its oak forests. Together, those components created the shoe industry, which later provided employment for many generations of Northamptonshire people, and is still the industry most associated with the county. I need hardly say that one of the great loves shared by my predecessor and me is the local football team, nicknamed the Cobblers. That highlights the importance of that industry to my local community. I know that he shares my disappointment that they failed to gain promotion again this year.

Disappointment is a part of life's rich pattern and is certainly no stranger to the good people of Northampton and those in the surrounding countryside. They were disappointed when Parliament ceased to meet in the town, as it did on many occasions in the 14th century—not least because, for a change, Parliament then brought money to the town rather than taking it away. They were also delighted when Cromwell placed an order for shoes for his new model army on the promise of later payment, only to be again disappointed when the payment failed to materialise. In more recent years, they have been disappointed by the demise of the shoe trade and the loss of many skilled jobs that generations had practised with pride, although quality products are still manufactured by the likes of Church's, Crockett and Jones, and Trickers.

My constituents have also been concerned by the closure of much of our engineering sector. British Timkin and Express Lifts have both closed over recent years, with the consequent loss of thousands of jobs. It is true that those jobs have been replaced, but many feel that they have been replaced by jobs demanding less skill and paying less money, and that disappoints them.

I do not want to give the impression that Northampton is "on its uppers". It is not. It is still a thriving town populated by hard-working people who want to live decent lives, create a caring society, obey the law, ensure that their kids have a good education, provide properly for the elderly and receive quality health care. However, the message that they gave to me on the doorstep is that they feel let down in many of those respects, too—they are disappointed. There were three subjects about which they felt especially aggrieved. Many asked me to raise those concerns at the first opportunity, and I am pleased to do so.

The Gracious Speech made it clear, as it always does, that estimates for the public services will be laid before this House, and those will include the revenue support grant. There is a growing feeling in my constituency that the revenue support grant is in danger of being distorted. Let me explain. Three years ago, Northampton borough council had a massive increase of up to 30 per cent. when it was under Labour control. Two years ago the increase was 8.5 per cent.—the council was still under Labour control. Last year it dropped to just 0.9 per cent. after Labour lost control.

Now I know the Government will argue that the reduction is caused by the need to transfer resources to less affluent areas, but the argument is not that

straightforward. I have already touched upon the loss of skilled well-paid jobs in Northampton and the influx of less skilled and therefore less well-paid jobs. As a consequence, many of my constituents feel that they are being neglected and ignored by a Government who are reducing the revenue support grant at the very time that that need is beginning to grow.

That feeling is heightened when we consider that Northampton and its immediate surroundings feature greatly in the Government's sustainable communities plan, which projects an extra 47,000 or so houses to be built by 2031. It does not take a member of Mensa to work out that such additional development will increase the town's population by almost 50 per cent., which is well above the figure projected in the county structure plan. That will create the need in and around Northampton for approximately 370 extra hospital beds, nine new upper schools and 27 new primary schools—to say nothing of the additional policing, transport, social and health services, waste disposal, sewage, leisure, water and employment requirements. Yet with all that need, the Government have stated that they will not guarantee the extra money for infrastructure.

No wonder local people feel that they are expected to take much more than their fair share of the housing needs of the London area. No wonder they feel that the Government are letting them down by failing to appreciate the infrastructure demands that they face. No wonder they feel that they are being short-changed by a Government who fail to support local people in Northampton properly at present and seem intent on failing to support them properly in future, while at the same time placing massively increased demands upon them.

I plead with the Government to address those problems urgently by fully recognising Northampton's needs in the forthcoming revenue support grant allocations. I also call upon the Government to reduce the burden of extra housing placed on the town and its immediate surrounding areas by an unfair, ill-conceived and under-resourced sustainable communities plan. I urge the Minister to ask the Government to include that rethink in their commitment to achieve sustainable communities.

Finally, I want to refer to the question of the travelling communities in our society. Northampton, like many other areas of the country, faces a serious problem caused by a section of the travelling community. Let me make it clear that not all Travellers act irresponsibly—and it may be only a small number in that community that do. Let me also make it clear that the great majority of my constituents would be happy to support a continuation of the travelling way of life—provided that Travellers fully accepted their responsibilities. However, some of them do cause damage in my community, place extra demands on resources and policing, and generally act as if they lived beyond the law.

I recognise the need for additional sites. Equally, I recognise the need to protect individuals' rights within our community, and we are not doing that. A change in the law is needed. That is what residents are calling for. I therefore ask that the Government consider that when they look at creating safe and secure communities and fostering a culture of respect.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity and look forward to having further opportunities, under your guidance.

2.58 pm

Mr. John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): I am privileged to speak in this Queen's Speech debate. I congratulate the new Members who have made maiden speeches: the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries), my hon. Friends the Members for Worsley (Ms Keeley) and for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) and the hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley). They have all focused on our primary responsibility: to represent our constituents. I congratulate them on the focus of their maiden speeches and wish them well.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) on his work as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He is unique in that he has left his post with acclaim from all sides in Northern Ireland. That is testimony to the great work that he has done in fostering the peace process.

I congratulate the Government, and particularly the Chancellor, on their stewardship of the economy. My new constituency is entitled West Dunbartonshire, and the stability of the economy was key to my successful return. I spoke to many hundreds, if not thousands, of people there, who told me that employment and youth employment, which is at record levels, were crucial in terms of their voting Labour. Low inflation and low interest rates have meant that businesses can plan for the future and home owners could have the confidence to invest in their houses and develop their own lives. The family-friendly policies—such as the working families tax credit and child benefit—as well as free nursery places for three and four-year-olds, were important.

One of my last duties as MP for Dumbarton was to sign a letter to a single parent of three children to tell her that she was getting £13,000 a year extra as a result of the working tax credit. That is what I call investing in families and communities and ensuring stability in the economy.

My new constituency includes Clydebank, and I wish to take the opportunity to thank my colleague, Tony Worthington, who has retired, for his sterling work in Clydebank over the past 18 years. I wish to continue his work in this House and elsewhere. Tony not only represented his constituents in a fine way, but articulated the needs of the international community through his membership of the International Development Committee. He hopes to continue that work with the World Bank and others, and I wish him well, as will all those who know him.

I wish to continue his work with Clydebank Re-built, one of Scotland's first pathfinders in urban regeneration. Clydebank Re-built, although a small development company, will develop the waterfront at Clydebank over the next seven years. That waterfront is where the famous great ships—the Queens, the Lusitania, the Britannia—were built at the former John Brown shipyard. Over £250 million of development work will be put into that area.

In the wider constituency, projects including Clydebank Re-built, the Strathleven regeneration company—which I chair—the Loch Lomond shores and the national park are making an impact on the

[Mr. John McFall]

community. The business environment is creating new jobs and providing high-quality business units, tourist destinations and attractive residential areas.

Housing is a crucial element in the post-industrial strategy for our region, and I note with pride that more than 60 per cent. of all the people in West Dunbartonshire have privately owned houses. The message to the Government from my constituents is that Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven—the main areas—need the continued economic stability that we have seen over the past eight years to ensure increasing prosperity for our constituents and our communities.

Turning to Westminster, there is an air of gloom, particularly among Opposition Members. We have heard that the economy is spiralling into decline, that house prices are down and that unemployment is up—but let us look at the record. In *The Sunday Times*, David Smith—a distinguished economic commentator—said that the official figures indicated that since the early 1990s more than 3 million jobs had been created, most in the private sector. It is important for us to hit that nail on the head: not all jobs have been created in the public sector. Jobs have been created there, but the majority have been created in the private sector.

Statistics for the past 12 months indicate that there has been a rise of almost 80,000 in the number of jobs in the construction industry, 30,000 in financial and business services and 30,000 in distribution including retailing. We have heard that retailers are on a downward path—but they are increasing their business property. If they are doing so, it must be because they have a buoyant outlook for the next few years. That property means more retailing, but also more jobs.

The position in which the British economy finds itself in is clear. We are the 12th richest economy in terms of the gross national product per capita and, after nearly falling behind Italy and thus putting our placing at the G7 table at risk, the UK has recently moved ahead of France into a comfortable fourth place in the table of world economies. UK average growth between 1990 and 2003 was 2.7 per cent., putting us at the head of our main competitors, France, Germany and Italy.

I note that the Ernst and Young ITEM Club estimate—one that is not always favourable to the Government—indicates that solid growth will continue over the next three years, with consumer confidence expected to recover in 2005 and house price worries evaporating. Those are the comments of outside and objective commentators, but we must face the future, and as the Chancellor indicated, our future is firmly in the global economy.

The Bank of England report on inflation has indicated that the pace of expansion of the world economy is slowing and the recovery in global equity prices has ground to a halt. It also says that global growth is expected to slow this year, but is still expected to be higher than the historical averages. The oil price futures curve has risen, suggesting that the record oil prices may persist in the medium term. That is the background.

Let us focus on what the Government have done over eight years. Despite constant challenges and the risks of instability in the world economy over the past five years—those include the Asian crisis when Korea went bankrupt, the Russian crisis, the IT crisis, the stock exchange crisis, the US downturn, which spread across Europe and Japan, with world trade stalling for the first time in decades, and the volatility of oil prices—we have outpaced our European competitors in terms of growth. Also, the UK matches the United States in terms of future optimism. Despite world instability we have a base from which to grow the economy, and that is down to the very effective stewardship we have experienced over the past few years.

We face challenges from China and India. With the Treasury Committee in the last Parliament, I visited China, which should be taken seriously for a number of reasons. The first is the sheer size of the country: China's population is 1.4 billion, something that we cannot understand. The second is the pace of change; we visited Shanghai and saw the result of the input there over the past 10 years. The Shanghai skyline mirrors that of Manhattan. Ten years ago there was no such skyline in Shanghai; the pace of change is enormous.

I make one request to the Government in terms of the future of the G7. The Government must ensure that China's place in the G7 is recognised by others. China is growing and we must recognise that. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor could do us all a favour in terms of the global economy by ensuring that China gets its rightful place in the G7.

Still thinking about Tony Worthington, I wish to say that there is a great need for the international finance facility, and a need to ensure that the humiliation felt by the billions of people in poverty is eliminated. I wish the Government, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor well at Gleneagles—on climate change, but also on the African objectives, as we try to ensure future security and prosperity for all of us in this divided world.

3.9 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for allowing me to make my maiden speech. I commend and congratulate the hon. Members for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries), for Worsley (Ms Keeley), for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) and for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley), all of whom made their maiden speeches today.

It is 99 years since the last Liberal Member for Westmorland made his maiden speech to this House. Ninety-nine years ago, my predecessor, Mr. Dudley Stewart-Smith, campaigned for fairer taxation and for greater support for pensioners and against an iniquitous and counterproductive foreign war. As we can see, despite being a century apart, we Liberals are nothing if not consistent.

That my constituency had to wait such a long time for its second Liberal MP may in part be due to the character and abilities of my Conservative predecessors. I pay tribute to my predecessor but one, Michael, now Lord, Jopling, who represented first Westmorland and then Westmorland and Lonsdale with great distinction for 33 years. However, I wish to pay particular tribute to my immediate predecessor, Tim Collins, who represented Westmorland and Lonsdale for eight years and proved himself in that time to be an energetic parliamentarian with sharp instincts. He rose quickly in his party, spending most of his time on the Conservative

Front Bench, speaking first for the Conservative party on transport and then on education, and then for the whole nation on matters to do with "Dr. Who". While on a political level I am delighted to replace Tim in this House, on a human level I feel for him, and I wish him and his family all the very best for the future.

Westmorland and Lonsdale does not need to lay claim to being one of the most attractive constituencies in the country, because that claim is self-evident. My constituency takes in large parts of three historic counties—Westmorland, Lancashire and Yorkshire. It contains significant swathes of two of our most breathtaking national parks—the Yorkshire dales and the Lake district, of which it has the largest chunk. Parts of the Furness peninsulas and the Arnside and Silverdale area of outstanding natural beauty also fall within the seat. Ours is a land of mountains and lakes, from the Furness mountains in the west to the Howgills near Sedbergh in the east, with the lakes Windermere, Coniston, Rydal Water and Grasmere in between.

The outstanding natural beauty of my constituency underpins its vital tourism industry, but it can also provide many challenges. Most challenging of all is the extreme and intolerable situation relating to the substantial lack of affordable housing. One in six houses in Westmorland and Lonsdale is a second home, and while I recognise the liberty of people elsewhere to purchase a second home, I value far more highly and recognise more firmly the more important competing liberty to have a decent first home.

Average income in my constituency is about £16,000 a year, and the average house price is about £200,000. I seek to persuade the Government—indeed, I have already written to the Minister for Housing and Planning—to take action to deal with this unsustainable situation. With regard to the Queen's Speech and this debate on the economy, I refer to the statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which has already been mentioned today, that additional help is to be given to allow first-time buyers to purchase homes through millions of shared ownership schemes. It is heartening to see the Government acknowledge the problem, but that move will barely make a dent in the problem that I have outlined.

Some 27 per cent. of young people born and bred in Westmorland and Lonsdale leave the area and make their homes elsewhere, largely because of the excessive cost of housing, the lack of rented accommodation in the social sector and the absence of well-paid work. With regard to the latter, last week, one of our largest employers in Kendal, Goodacres, announced the loss of 50 highly skilled jobs. To lose so many young people is not only deeply upsetting in terms of dividing local families, but extremely damaging to our economy.

Losing young people from our communities also has an obvious subsequent impact on the birth rate, reducing demand for our local maternity unit and reducing school rolls, and therefore threatening the viability of some of our most important local services. My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) campaigned a few years on the slogan "Breed for Cornwall". I am afraid that the proportion of my fellow residents who are in a position to breed for Westmorland is sadly diminishing. My wife and I are doing our best, but we cannot make up the shortfall on our own.

Successive Governments have left Westmorland and Lonsdale with only a quarter of its original council housing stock; average house prices that are more than 12 times average incomes; and farming and manufacturing industries that are undervalued and undermined to the extent that our communities are now under extreme threat. In the past 12 months alone, there has been a 60 per cent. increase in the number of people in my constituency presenting as homeless.

The lack of any limits on second home ownership gives freedom to a few to purchase such properties in volumes that have become unsustainable, thus putting up house prices and removing from the market otherwise good homes for local families. Changes to the planning laws, local taxation and the financial rules governing local authority housing are among the measures that we must pursue if we are to ensure that there is a future for rural communities such as ours.

My constituency remains one where agriculture and farming are vital to the local economy and to our culture and environment. Farmers who are recovering from the body blow that was the foot and mouth epidemic four years ago are now placed yet again in an economically marginal position by the unnecessary tardiness of the single farm payments scheme. Farmers will not only be paid in arrears for their work, but these payments are now to be paid at least two months late. Farmers may wonder whether Ministers would put up with their salaries being paid to them at some ill-determined and delayed point in the future.

My constituents are generous, outward-looking people who value fairness at home and abroad. Indeed, the best attended debate during the recent election campaign in my constituency was the World Development Movement's "Make poverty history" meeting. I therefore know that many of my constituents will have been horrified to read in the press that the European Trade Commissioner, who I understand once sat in this House, is seeking to undermine this Government's moderately progressive stance on economic partnership agreements between the European Union and the developing world. The Commissioner in question is allegedly expressing a view that this Government should support economic partnership agreements that allow multinational companies unfettered access to the markets of developing countries.

I would wish to call on the Prime Minister to put his old friend in his place and to make a stand consistent with his stated support of the "Make poverty history" campaign. Countries that have been exploited to such a damaging extent by the developed world would be exploited and impoverished yet further if they were forced to open up their markets to powerful multinational companies. It is not free trade that we need, but fair trade. Freedom rarely comes about either in the housing market of Westmorland and Lonsdale or among the peoples of the developing world through an absence of intervention. Competing liberties must be refereed, and in the absence of any invisible hand, visible intervention by the community is essential if real freedom is to prevail.

I know that my job here is lent to me; it is not mine in perpetuity. I have it only so long as I deserve it in the eyes of the people of Westmorland and Lonsdale. The people of my constituency voted for the first time in 99 years for a progressive Liberal Democrat who will fight to protect and strengthen our communities, who

[Tim Farron]

will be a powerful advocate for them and who will be Westmorland's man at Westminster, and not Westminster's man in Westmorland. For the duration of my time here, that is precisely what they will get.

3.16 pm

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): I offer my congratulations to all who have spoken before me on their excellent and heartfelt speeches, and especially to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), on his interesting and thoughtful contribution.

Like most Members of this place, I approach this moment with excitement and trepidation. We are bombarded with advice from colleagues, friends and family about the content, timing and conventions of this place. The advice varies from "Make it in the first 24 hours, before anybody knows who you are" to "Well, leave it a year and learn from everybody else's mistakes." Others say "Be workmanlike, keep it short and tell jokes." I am unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Stephen Pound), whose maiden speech I was privileged to witness, in that I lack his comic timing, so there will be no jokes. He literally had hon. Members rolling in the aisles, and I would recommend his speech to hon. Members as a very good read.

The conventions however are clear, so I will now focus on my constituency, Plymouth, Devonport. I urge hon. Members who have never ventured into Plymouth to do so. It is a great place in a fantastic setting, bordered as it is by the Dartmoor national park to the north and the Tamar estuary to the west, spanned by the Royal Albert bridge, the last and greatest of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's great railway engineering structures. To the south is Plymouth city centre itself; vibrant and exciting, its skyline is marked out by cranes, indicating the regeneration that is happening in this historic city. The architect David Mackay has developed a new and exciting vision for the city that will have positive outcomes for its wider hinterland, extending into my constituency and beyond.

This city's great history is revered around the world. Indeed, more than 40 towns and cities are named in honour of Plymouth. Plymouth conjures up names such as Francis Drake and the pilgrim fathers. Its heritage is something that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) value greatly. The maritime history of the area extends up from Plymouth harbour into my constituency, where the royal naval dockyard is situated. Devonport was initially known as Plymouth dock, but as it grew in importance, local pride and rivalry took over and it became the port of Devon—Devonport. It has buildings dating from the 18th century, through the period of the great sea captains such as Nelson and into the 21st century. It was, like the rest of Plymouth, targeted during the second world war, and many workers gave their lives, as did their families. More than 1,000 civilians died in Plymouth.

In its heyday, the dockyard employed more than 15,000 people. The number is now down to 5,000, but they are carrying out essential work for the Royal Navy refitting Type 22 and Type 23 frigates and Vanguard nuclear submarines. It is vital that we retain locally the valuable engineering and technological skills of that work force. The quality of those jobs, which are generally highly skilled and therefore better paid, is crucial to the long-term survival of what is otherwise a low-wage economy. Devonport has an ongoing and essential role to play in maintaining our fleet, and I shall certainly champion that cause in the House.

The dockyard is a major employer, but there is a need to develop a more flexible work force to meet the needs of a growing and changing economy. We in Plymouth want to be able to meet the challenges of the 21st century, so skills training and community development play a vital role. In my constituency, there are a number of excellent training establishments meeting a wide range of needs, including the Plymouth engineering group training scheme, which targets young people and also retrains older, more experienced workers such as plumbers and electricians who are seeking to update their skills; the brand new training centre at the Peninsula Medical School, which has just accepted its first intake of medical students; and the radiology academy, which will be one of only three in the country training much needed radiologists. That is all evidence of the massive increase in investment in the front-line services in our health service.

Plymouth is home to the innovative Tamar science park, which is rapidly growing new businesses in hi-tech areas linked to medical research. Cardioanalytics, which was set up by two consultant radiologists about eight years ago, now has an international reputation and employs 60 to 70 people. In Devonport, local communities work at a micro-level to improve the skills of people who live in them. Individuals and organisations bring people together and provide basic community facilities. In Belliver, Marlene and Peter Turner run a community centre from their front room. They support various craft groups, organise City and Guilds courses and arrange the annual St. George's Day festival, which I was delighted to be able to attend this year. They are now introducing proposals for a purpose-built community space. In Honicknowle, there is a thriving youth and community centre where excellent work is being done to motivate young people. That positive action helps young people to find a purpose in life and, to use a much used phrase, learn to respect others as well as to be respected themselves.

I welcome measures in the Queen's Speech that make children and young people a priority but also clamp down on antisocial behaviour and assist authorities and parents in the setting of boundaries for young people. The Budshead Trust is another group that does excellent outreach work and encourages local people to participate in their local community. Of all the schemes that I have visited in Plymouth, Sure Start has been the real catalyst for change in some of my constituency's more deprived areas. Sure Start schemes have acted as motivators for young women and men who previously felt cast adrift. Along with the new deal, they support them into new pathways of work and training. I am immensely proud of the investment that the Labour Government have made in setting up and running those schemes, and I look forward to the further expansion of children's centres in my area.

The Plymouth, Devonport constituency is made up of a number of separate communities. Because of the topography of the area, links between them are not easy. Much of the housing is post-war local authority property, built to house people who were bombed out of their homes and dispossessed during the second world war. A lot of it has fallen into disrepair, and it presents a major challenge to the city council, which is responsible for much of it. Ensuring that the city council has the funding necessary to manage that stock will be one of my earliest challenges as a new Member of Parliament, and I shall undoubtedly beat a path to the door of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

I am encouraged by the emphasis placed on the need for new affordable housing by my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In an area where housing costs have risen sharply but where wages have remained below average—a dual-income couple earning 25 per cent. above the average in the south-west struggle to buy the average south-west home—new affordable homes, including some of the £60,000 homes flagged up at the recent sustainable communities conference in Manchester, would be very welcome indeed.

Issues relating to the economy, housing, communities, transport and the dockyard were themes of the maiden speeches of my predecessors. David Jamieson, who decided to stand down at the election, had a reputation in the House as a witty and passionate speaker. He is best known in Plymouth for his work following the tragic deaths of four children in the Southway area of my constituency in the Lyme bay disaster. David pushed through a private Member's Bill and got the Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Act 1995 on to the statute book without the support of the Government of the time, which was no mean feat. In later years, as a transport Minister, David fought passionately for the cause of improving road safety.

Other names spring from the pages of *Hansard*, including Michael Foot, who is deeply cherished by the people of Plymouth and whom I met recently at the launch of the Mackay vision for Plymouth at the House of Commons. He is still an official substitute for Plymouth Argyle football club, with the number 90 on his shirt, to match his years. Lord Owen, too, continues to take a close interest in Plymouth. Devonport was also represented by Leslie Hore-Belisha, a Liberal known for the eloquence of his speeches. He is perhaps best known for the introduction of the highway code and the Belisha beacon. Plymouth has also been notably well represented by women, including Lady Astor, Dame Joan Vickers, Dame Janet Fookes and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton who, if she were cut in half—heaven forbid that anyone should want to do so—would be found to have Plymouth running right through her like a stick of rock. I very much hope that, in time, I will be as strong a champion for Plymouth, Devonport as she is for Plymouth, Sutton. I am honoured to serve in Parliament and I am mindful of my responsibility to the people of Plymouth, Devonport. I very much hope I can live up to the example set by my predecessors, and I certainly look forward to the challenge.

3.26 pm

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech on the final day of debate on the Queen's Speech. It was a pleasure to listen to the maiden speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley) and for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries), and by the hon. Members for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck), for Worsley (Ms Keeley), for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I wish them all the best in their parliamentary careers. I would like to add my own tribute to those that have already been made to the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) for his excellent work, both in Northern Ireland and in the Principality.

I count it a huge honour to be elected as the new Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire. I am only the second Member to represent the constituency, which was created before the 1997 election, when it was won by Jackie Lawrence, and again in 2001, for the Labour party. Jackie retired at the end of the last Parliament. She and I were opponents in the election held four years ago, and we both fought robust campaigns. The more that I saw of her during that election, however, the more that I was struck by the sincerity and humanity with which she carried out her duties as a Member of Parliament. She entered Parliament for exactly the right reasons—to improve the lives of Pembrokeshire people—and served her constituents well during her eight years as an MP. Her parting remark to me on election night in 2001 was, "Best of luck with your parliamentary career, Stephen, just not here in Pembrokeshire." I am afraid that I have disappointed her, but it was typical of her integrity and grace that not only did she send her congratulations after my win on 5 May but, last weekend, she welcomed my family and me to her home, where she passed on some excellent advice on being a Member of Parliament and treated us all to excellent home-made scones. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will join me in wishing her all the very best in retirement.

Preseli Pembrokeshire, with much justification, can be described as one of the most beautiful parliamentary constituencies, containing as it does much of the Pembrokeshire coastal park with its 185 miles of footpath running alongside scenes of spectacular beauty. The coastline is important to Pembrokeshire. We are surrounded by the sea on three sides, and that has been the source of our comparative economic advantage throughout our history. Even today, after whaling, fishing, oil refining and defence-related industries have all flourished and then declined, the sea is still important to our local economy.

We have two ports: Fishguard, with its ferry service to Rosslare in Ireland; and the port of Milford Haven, which is the UK's fifth largest port, with major oil interests, a remnant of the fishing industry, and an Irish ferry from Pembroke dock. As I speak, construction is under way on two major liquefied natural gas terminals near Milford Haven. When completed, those could provide 30 per cent. of the UK's natural gas needs, which will be shipped into the nearby port of Milford Haven. Not surprisingly in an area of such outstanding natural beauty, the liquefied natural gas development is not without controversy, and some specific issues need

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to be addressed. The LNG investment, however, will bring a vital injection of economic activity to west Wales, which could provide a substantial long-term pay-off for many years to come.

As well as our coastal heritage, Pembrokeshire is also home to Britain's smallest city, St. David's, with its picturesque streets and beautiful ancient cathedral. St. David's was a site of huge importance in early Christendom. It lay on the intercontinental route that took Irish pilgrims through Britain on the way to Rome and sometimes Jerusalem. Still today, the A40 trunk road, which leads from Fishguard through Pembrokeshire towards the M4 corridor is recognised by the EU strategic trans-European network, which links western Ireland with mainland continental Europe.

Travelling along the single-lane A40 through Pembrokeshire can be a slow and frustrating journey, however. Upgrading the A40 to a dual carriageway is certainly overdue. Local business needs it, local people want it, and while I am a Member of this House I want to do whatever I can to make the case for it, and, I hope, to persuade the rather Cardiff-centric Welsh Assembly of the need for investment in critical infrastructure in other parts of Wales.

In the heart of Pembrokeshire is the old town of Haverfordwest—the county town of Pembrokeshire—which I am blessed to be able to say is my home town. I grew up there, in a street of council housing, which backed on to my old secondary school. Many of the houses in that street have now been bought and had small porches, kitchen extensions and other improvements added to them. I want to add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries), who said that no one should lose sight of what the Conservative right-to-buy scheme did for hard-working, working-class families in constituencies such as mine. Of course we need to provide an adequate rented sector for individuals and families who might, through different circumstances in their life, have to fall back on social housing, but the aspiration of the vast majority of people in this country is towards home ownership, which should be recognised as a key goal of housing policy.

There have been Crabbs in Pembrokeshire for many generations, and not just on our wonderful beaches. My grandfather was a baker in Haverfordwest at a time when, like other small market towns, it was full of independent traders, grocers, shopkeepers and tradesmen. In those days, there was no such thing as a small business sector; there were only small businesses. Times change, and today Haverfordwest has a Tesco, a Morrisons, a Kwiksave and an Aldi, and I am told that we will soon have a Lidl store as well. I am not a betting man, but I am willing to wager that not many of our long-suffering local farmers who still constitute a significant part of the local economy will see much of their produce on the shelves of that supermarket when it comes to Haverfordwest.

A principal reason why Pembrokeshire is such an attractive place for the food discounters is that our per capita GDP is so much lower than the UK national average. GDP in Pembrokeshire is less than 70 per cent. of the EU's 15-member average, which qualifies us for objective 1 status. We are currently in receipt of structural funds through that programme. I do not want to be too controversial today, but I am more than a little sceptical of the long-term success of EU structural funds in closing the wealth gap between regions. The targets for the EU cohesion and structural funds have consistently not been met.

Objective 1 did, however, provide an important opportunity for many stakeholders in west Wales to focus like never before on what needs to be done to improve the region's economy. My fear is that that was a missed opportunity. Many business people in Pembrokeshire tell me that they do not feel that the business community was actively involved in the objective 1 programme, and that the process was dominated by public sector bodies. I believe that small business is the backbone of the Pembrokeshire economy and I want to do whatever I can while I am a Member of the House to provide a voice for the hard-working men and women who comprise that sector.

I greatly value the commitment in the Queen's Speech to reducing burdens on business—business regulations. The small business community in my constituency is looking for action, not more words, from this Parliament.

I am grateful for the courtesy of the House this afternoon, and to the people of Preseli Pembrokeshire for giving me the opportunity to be their representative during this Parliament.

3.34 pm

Ed Balls (Normanton) (Lab): It is a great honour to make my maiden speech in this House on this, the final day of debate on the Queen's Speech, to follow the thoughtful speeches of my right hon. Friends the Members for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) and for West Dunbartonshire (Mr. McFall) and to follow a series of excellent maiden speeches, not least that of the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb), which together show that we can look forward to a number of thoughtful and constructive contributions in the debates of this House in the years to come.

This is the first maiden speech by a Member of Parliament for Normanton for 22 years. Bill O'Brien, my predecessor, was a hugely respected MP, whose commitment to improving the lives of hard-working families in our area is beyond question. Almost everyone I have met in our constituency has a personal story to tell of how Bill has helped them, a friend or a family member. I know, too, that he is widely respected in the House for his parliamentary experience, for his detailed knowledge of mining and local government matters and for his wisdom. I have been told by many hon. Members how they have turned to Bill for advice and support during their parliamentary careers.

I also want to mention Bill's family and in particular his wife, Jean, who has also served for 22 years, as an MP's spouse. It is my considered view, speaking from some personal experience, that the role of the MP's spouse is not always fully appreciated at a political level. I want today to set the record straight: Jean O'Brien has consistently been by Bill's side, a tower of quiet strength and dignity. I am sure that all hon. Members will want to wish them a long and happy retirement from the Commons and to thank Bill for his commitment to public service.

I have had the privilege of speaking to many hundreds of voters in the past year about issues that directly affect their daily lives—pensions, skilled jobs, plans for a new hospital at Pinderfields, out-of-school child care and the need for more police and community support officers on the beat. All those issues I will be actively pursuing in the coming months. As we have talked, time and again I have heard and felt first hand the powerful traditions that run deep through Normanton.

My constituency forms an arc around the north of the city of Wakefield, running from Sharlston and the town of Normanton in the east, through Altofts, Stanley, Outwood and Wrenthorpe to the north, and then round to Ossett and Horbury in the west, all linked together by the M62 and M1 motorways, which intersect in the constituency. It is a constituency united by a strong industrial tradition in manufacturing, railways and coal mining, and by a long-standing civic, trade union and co-operative tradition. In our district, the Co-operative party is our conscience, and I look forward to participating actively as a member of the Co-operative group of Labour MPs.

Most important, Normanton boasts a historic Labour tradition, with the longest continuous Labour representation of any seat in England—a continuous representation, that is, since 1885, when the Liberals stood aside for 12 working-class Lib-Lab candidates. We are proud of Normanton's Labour tradition, matched only by the Rhondda valley in south Wales, and if I may be so bold, long may it continue.

We are now in a time of great change, as the revolution of globalisation transforms communities such as ours, but these challenges of technological change, foreign visitors and new investors are, for us, nothing new. Few constituencies can boast visitors as distinguished as Queen Victoria, Prime Ministers Gladstone and Disraeli and US President Ulysses Grant, all of whom visited our area in the mid-19th century, Normanton being, for passengers travelling north to south in the pre-buffet era, the restaurant stop of choice.

One visitor above all left his mark: the Emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro II, who stopped for lunch in August 1871, heard about the local colliery at Hopetown, arranged a visit and caused such a stir that the pit shaft was renamed Dom Pedro and became known as the Don. The emperor also visited the Normanton iron works, was shown a special rail and immediately ordered a batch to be sent back and used in the expansion of the Brazilian railway.

To us, globalisation is nothing new, and well over a century later the same strengths that made my constituency an industrial leader—our strategic location, our manufacturing expertise and our skilled work force—are now the key to our future prosperity. It is the task of the Wakefield Way steering group, on which I serve, to ensure that we exploit those advantages to the full. We want to see the Wakefield district established as a key logistics cluster, and a centre of industrial and manufacturing expertise.

We also have to be honest about the weaknesses that we must address. We still have too many people trapped on incapacity benefit, who want to work but need extra help and support to return to work. Compared with other parts of Yorkshire, we have skills shortages alongside low levels of qualifications in the adult work force. It is both an affront to social justice and a real economic threat that so many 16-year-olds in my constituency still leave school without a proper qualification. I therefore welcome the measures set out today by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in this Queen's Speech debate on science, skills, employment, housing and regional policy, which will really help us in that task.

We are able to debate today how our wider economic policy can build on stability—rather than, as used to happen, how we can avoid stop-go—because the Labour Government have put in place a new British model of monetary and fiscal policy for our country and taken the tough decisions to establish and entrench economic stability. Twenty years ago, the Wakefield district was labelled a "high unemployment area", with one young person in every four unemployed for more than six months as a result of the devastating loss of manufacturing jobs and the closures of the pits. It was not a price worth paying. Today, because of our economic stability, our district has an unemployment rate, not above, but below the national average. The new deal has cut youth unemployment from a peak of 3,300 young people out of work in 1984 to just 130 today—20 in my constituency. It is because of the proactive and forward-looking approach that Labour has taken to economic policy—Bank of England independence, the symmetric inflation target and the two fiscal rules—that, for the first time in a generation, my constituents are benefiting from what is close to a full employment economy.

That stability—that prudence—has been for a purpose. We have shown that a Government committed to progressive goals—increasing investment in our public services, introducing a national minimum wage, lifting 1 million children out of poverty—can also deliver the lowest inflation for 30 years, the lowest mortgage rates for 40 years and record levels of employment. Some said that a Labour Government could not run a stable economy and pursue progressive goals. The present Government have proved them wrong.

At this point, I must confess that, yes, as a young economist working in opposition back in 1994, I wrote that truly immemorable phrase, "post-neoclassical endogenous growth theory"—but there was a penultimate draft from which that infamous phrase had been excised, and it was not I but a rather more distinguished Member of this House who wrote in the margin, "Put back the theory." From 1997, I was proud to serve the Labour Chancellor and the Labour Government for seven years as economic adviser and then chief economic adviser to the Treasury. I was privileged to chair the International Monetary and Financial Committee Deputies during a period in which Britain, under the leadership of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, have led international efforts to reform the international financial architecture and meet the millennium development goals.

I know that those opportunities—all the opportunities that my family and I have had—were made possible only by the achievements of the Labour party in government. My grandfather, a lorry driver, died from cancer soon after the war, when my father, the youngest of three boys, was only 10. My father—from a

[Ed Balls]

widowed family in a working-class community in Norwich—was able to stay on at school at 16 and get a scholarship to university. All the opportunities that he and we have been able to enjoy were made possible only because of the welfare state that the Labour Government created in 1945, reflecting our core belief that opportunity should be available for all, not just for the privileged few.

I am now able to be in public service once more, as a Member of this House and as Labour's ninth MP for Normanton. My Labour predecessors—Benjamin Pickard, William Parrott, Fred Hall, Tom Smith, George Sylvester, Thomas Brooks, Albert Roberts and Bill O'Brien—were all coal miners, every one of them. They were Labour because the adversity they suffered taught them not selfishness, but solidarity. However insurmountable the obstacles seemed to be, they never settled for second best for themselves or anyone else in their struggle for full employment and social justice. I hope that, in the coming years, I shall be able to demonstrate the humility, hard work and commitment to public service for which previous Normanton MPs are known, remembered and honoured, and thus enable my constituency's historical traditions to live on renewed in this century. We owe it to our predecessors, as we owe it to our families and to future generations, to complete their work and, on the platform of stability that we have built, secure an economically strong and socially just society of which we can be proud.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today.

3.44 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I know a fair amount about English history, and after listening to eight excellent maiden speeches I now know something about English geography. They were all first-class contributions. I mention particularly the speech of the hon. Member for Normanton (Ed Balls). To say that the hon. Gentleman's reputation precedes him in the House seems somewhat inadequate in all the circumstances. He certainly did not disappoint in the excellence of his first contribution in the Chamber. In owning up to the endogenous growth cycle theory, I was wondering whether he had written one or two speeches thus far in the debate. We can say of his own fine contribution that it was not brown and it certainly was not balls either in this instance. I look forward enormously to more contributions from the hon. Gentleman.

I sometimes think that my party's policies are insufficiently radical. There is, for example, our policy of extending the franchise to 16-year-olds. That strikes me as insufficiently radical when I saw the school results in the Chancellor's constituency—the SNP swept the board in the school elections. I was particularly interested in one contribution that I received from a young man called Edmund Peppitt, who stood for the SNP at the Royal Russell school in Croydon, and came within seven votes of a shock win. I was struck by the strength of opinion in Croydon. I shall quote briefly from young Edmund's speech. He says:

"Why is Edmund Peppitt standing as a Scottish Nationalist in Croydon? Well, I'll tell you. It's because I believe in fairness. Scotland has contributed more to the UK than any other part of Britain—for example, £600 billion of North Sea Oil, green energy in the form of hydro-electric and windpower, a large part of this country's armed forces, penicillin, the telephone, television, whisky and golf. But Scotland is ruled by Westminster and cannot decide its own future, which is simply not fair... what has Westminster given Scotland in return? Well, the Conservatives gave Scotland the poll tax and Labour has given Scotland the war in Iraq and afterwards sacked Scottish soldiers who had fought in it. Now you may not care about Scotland because it is a long way from Croydon. But you care about fairness. And everyone here who has links with a country that has been ruled by another country will know the value of freedom, independence and self-determination. So if fairness, freedom, independence and self-determination are important to you, vote Scottish National Party. You don't have to be Scottish to believe in what it stands for."

Given the success of the young shadow Chancellor in writing speeches for the erstwhile Leader of the Opposition, perhaps I should be employing young Edmund to be writing some speeches for me. I am not saying that we will intervene in Croydon at the next election, but if we do so at the election after next, I suspect that we could do a great deal worse than to have Edmund Peppitt as the first SNP candidate for Croydon.

We can interpret the election result in a variety of ways. Statistics are well known to the hon. Member for Normanton. In the island of Ireland, the Democratic Unionist party managed to secure an 80 per cent. increase in representation. On the mainland, the SNP managed to secure a 50 per cent. increase and, admittedly, an increase from four seats to six. None the less, it was a sizeable increase. The Conservatives and Liberals managed to achieve an increase of 20 per cent. and Labour lost about 12 per cent. of its Members. Labour, however, won the election, and that must be acknowledged and Labour must be congratulated.

I cannot help but think that the Prime Minister, in many ways, lost the election in the sense that two thirds of the people voted against him, that perhaps two thirds of Labour Members would rather see the back of him and that he maintains his position by promising to go sooner rather than later. That is not a particularly secure basis for the Prime Minister's present position.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): I am interested to hear how well the SNP did. Why does the hon. Gentleman think that the Welsh nationalists had such a disappointing result?

Mr. Salmond: My friends in Plaid Cymru, the party of Wales, are saving themselves for the National Assembly elections in 2007, where they intend to make rapid and significant strides forward.

Mr. Tom Harris (Glasgow, South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is proud of the achievement of his party in the general election even though it slipped from second to third place in terms of the popular vote in Scotland. When it slips to fourth place, will he also see that as an advance?

Mr. Salmond: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the only opinion poll that we have had thus far for the 2007 Scottish elections, taken by YouGov, which accurately forecast in the same poll the result of the general election in Scotland, showed the Scottish national party not in second place, but in first place.

I am not claiming that one opinion poll two years before an election means certain victory, but I am saying that we are in with a fighting chance. I know that secretly the hon. Gentleman and some of his colleagues wish us well as we look forward to that Scottish election.

May I say to Scottish Labour Members in particular that I was interested in the argument that the Chancellor had defied his critics, and that every time doom and gloom was forecast, he came up trumps once again. I see him back on the Treasury Bench. When I tried to intervene earlier I merely intended to ask who carries the responsibility for the three quarterly downturns that there have been in the Scottish economy since the Chancellor took office. I was struck by how much of the Labour party election campaign claimed the credit for 50 consecutive quarters of UK economic growth. I wondered whether it followed that responsibility would be taken by the Chancellor for the three quarters of downturn in the Scottish economy since 1997.

I tabled a parliamentary question on the matter just before the election, and received a charming letter back from the Treasury, saying that the Chancellor wanted me to know that it was more appropriate for the Secretary of State for Scotland to provide a written answer to the parliamentary question about negative growth. I am not aware what economic powers the Secretary of State for Scotland is meant to have to carry responsibility for the disappointing performance of the Scottish economy, and for the fact that Scotland currently has the highest unemployment rate of any nation in the United Kingdom and the lowest growth rate of any country in Europe.

One of my predecessors, the late Bob Boothby who represented East Aberdeenshire, once described the Secretary of State for Scotland as the scullery-maid of the Cabinet, in the sense that he had to clean up the mess left by other Ministers. It now seems that the present Secretary of State for Scotland has to carry the responsibility that should properly belong to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

During the election campaign I did not see much evidence of the economic miracle that the Chancellor claims. I saw a fine factory about to close in Scalpaigh in the Western Isles, or Na h-Eileanan an Iar—I have been practising the Gaelic name for the constituency. In many ways the proportionate impact on that small fragile community is as great as the industrial story that emerged during the campaign about the closure of Rover in the midlands, as are the closures in the defence and food industries in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson).

A hundred thousand manufacturing jobs have been lost in Scotland since 1997. I know that some people think that manufacturing is not the basis of a modern economy. If we glance at the balance of payments, we are entitled to be concerned about the demise of so much manufacturing industry. That process of closures continues apace around Scotland.

In the past few days in the north of Scotland we have seen Norfrost go into receivership. For the past 30 years it has been a beacon defying gravity, producing high quality fridge freezers from Caithness. We have seen large scale redundancies at R B Farquar in Huntley, with production being moved to a facility in the Czech Republic. We have seen the closure of the buying headquarters of Aberness in Aberdeen and its move to a more central location. In each of those closures or redundancies, we see pressures bearing down on much of the industrial economy in Scotland.

My question to the Chancellor on the Queen's Speech is how the economic policy will combat the pressure on transport costs felt by a company such as Norfrost. Where are the measures that will improve the competitive position and allow our economy to compete with the developing economies in Europe? With the centralisation of buying processes, which affect so much of the retail chain, what protection is offered and what thought is being given to the fragility and vulnerability of marginal and remote economies?

I want to turn in closing to the subject of energy, because I believe part of the answer to the questions that I have just posed is to maximise the benefit from resource economics. I saw in *The Times* today that I was not the only person who was thinking about energy. It says:

> "Hovering half a mile above the English countryside last month, David Willetts began to wonder where the Government's energy plans were heading. As he looked down from the Conservatives' campaign helicopter, he 'suddenly began to see how many wind farms there are cropping up all over the place, sometimes in rather beautiful places'."

Now that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) is applying his formidable brain power to the question, I hope to have some support for the proposals that I have been putting forward. First, there is the proposal to maximise the potential of Scotland's offshore alternative energy resources—25 per cent. of Europe's wind potential; 25 per cent. of the tidal potential and perhaps 10 per cent. of the wave potential. Secondly, we should not discriminate against that vast base of future energy by charging £20 a kilowatt to connect to the grid in the north of Scotland, while in this part of the kingdom the subsidy is something approaching £10 a kilowatt. If we are trying to reinforce the prosperity of places such as Scotland, and perhaps answer young Mr. Peppitt's questions on fairness, which should apply to every part of the kingdom, we should not discriminate against the potential of Scotland—having won the natural lottery twice, and having bankrolled the present Chancellor and his predecessor's economic plans, when the Chancellor this year is now looking at £10 billion of oil revenues flooding in to his Exchequer—to lead Europe in the exploitation of renewable power as we have done in other energies.

3.56 pm

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The transformation of the economy and its impact on jobs, reflected in today's excellent maiden speeches, remain my abiding memory of the last election. Figures published last week show the strongest labour market for decades, employment at near record levels and unemployment at the lowest level for 30 years. The highest rate of employment of all the major world economies is the result of Government policies. Compare the UK for example with the rates of the G7. We have the highest employment rate at 74.9 per cent. We see Italy at 56.2 per cent. We have the second lowest unemployment rate at 4.7 per cent., marginally below

[Mr. Tom Clarke]

Japan, which is No. 1. That compares with the rate in France and Germany of 9.8 per cent., which is more than double ours.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): How many of those extra jobs that have been created have been created in the public sector, and how many in the private sector?

Mr. Clarke: Yes, I am coming to that.

Under the Government, employment is up by 2 million. The Conservative party let unemployment rise twice to 3 million between 1979 and 1997. So I speak with genuine pride about our achievements and our proposals in the Queen's Speech. I am proud of the opportunities for our young people. Long-term youth unemployment has fallen by 92 per cent. to its lowest level for a quarter of a century. I am proud that the numbers claiming unemployment benefit are back to the levels that were seen in the mid-70s, and I am proud that long-term unemployment has fallen by 75 per cent. since 1997.

In my constituency, the new deal has been an outstanding success. We claim a share in the fact that over 480,000 young people have been helped back into work, and that all important first step into the labour market should not be underestimated. The suggestion that those jobs are predominantly in the public sector is simply not accurate. Two thirds of the increase in jobs since 1997 has been in the private sector.

There should, however, be no request for forgiveness for employing 220,000 more workers in education, 280,000 more workers in the national health service and 40,000 more workers in the police. Cumulatively, that is a credit to this Government. Of course, we live in a period of constant change and challenge. For example, at first glance too many manufacturing jobs have gone since 1997, but in fact—as is reflected by global comparisons—we are producing more output with fewer workers. Output is 25 per cent. higher than 20 years ago.

Economic stability is one hallmark of this Government, and there is widespread confidence, particularly among home owners. According to the Bank of Scotland's house price index, house prices have risen by 54 per cent. over the past three years. I welcome the fact that my constituents share in a genuine property-owning democracy.

There was one other big issue in the election, and I am delighted that it has been mentioned by other hon. Members today. At the hustings, in the churches and on the streets, my constituents were absolutely committed to the concept of making poverty history. The main themes of the UK's G8 presidency will be Africa and climate change. Both are pressing issues in the world today, and Africa demands particular attention as the world's poorest continent.

The Prime Minister recently launched the Commission for Africa to take a fresh look at the challenges that African countries face. It will consider what needs to be done to meet the millennium development goals on time; regrettably, we are currently not on course to meet them.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP) *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: However, the commission will make recommendations in order to address the full range of issues, including trade, HIV and education. Clearly, other regions also merit attention, but Africa contains 18 of the world's 20 poorest countries.

When the G8 summit meets later this year at Gleneagles, which is less than one hour's drive from my constituency, what will be required is resolute political will. A "can't-do" attitude from any member of the G8 will be wholly unacceptable if we are to overcome what I passionately believe to be the biggest challenge to peace in modern times—avoidable poverty.

Angus Robertson *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: Richard Curtis, one of Britain's leading screenwriters, penned the script for a movie called "The Girl in the Café", featuring Kelly Macdonald, which highlights what *The Observer* described as the cynicism of global politics and its ultimate victims: the voiceless people of Africa. At one point, Kelly clicks her fingers three times as someone speaks. Everyone knows precisely what the three clicks mean: every three seconds of every day, a child in Africa dies from extreme poverty. Fortunately, we have a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who, unlike the actors in the film, uniquely see those important issues as absolutely paramount for Britain. If a breakthrough on poverty led to an agreement—we are told that such an agreement will be recalled in history alongside the abolition of slavery and the extinction of apartheid—what an outstanding reward it would be for humankind. As Richard Curtis said:

"If 50,000 people died in London on Monday, in Rome on Tuesday, in Munich on Wednesday, in New York on Thursday and in Paris on Friday, they would find the money and the solution to the problem as they walked from the lift to the breakfast bar, they just would".

A breakthrough on poverty means writing off debt, fair trade and encouraging western cultures to do as we do and increase their aid.

We can do something to obtain the moral authority to challenge the corruption that undoubtedly exists in developing countries. For every £1 in grant aid given to developing countries, more than £13 bounces back in debt repayments, which is why the Chancellor wants to eradicate £1,000 billion of debt owed by poor countries to the major banks. That could put an end to this statistic, which would be more than worthwhile: one in 16 women in Africa is at risk of dying during pregnancy or childbirth, compared with one in 1,400 in Europe.

With the characteristic bluntness to which he is entitled, Bob Geldof has said that if members of the G8

"come here with the attitude that I know they currently have today, of doing nothing—don't come, stay at home, not welcome."

He went on to say:

"On the other hand, should you come with the intent to stop this open wound, you will be embraced and remembered throughout this century."

In that spirit, I welcome the Queen's Speech, which I genuinely believe offers opportunities and hope to my constituents and to millions more.

4.7 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am sure that all hon. Members feel for those who are making their maiden speeches. We all remember the terror, hesitations and anxieties that go into the process. I give a cheer that so many hon. Members have accomplished their maiden speeches so well today. New Members refresh the most important institution in our national life—the Commons.

It was a privilege to listen to the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy). He is unusual in this age of "I am". He was a modest, dignified, decent and remarkable Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I wonder at the extraordinariness of modern Governments—Ministers do not last for any length of time and they are moved when they begin to become experienced.

There were two big "I ams" in the general election campaign. There is no Labour party or Conservative party any more; there are leaders who say that they will do this or that for us. The leaders use phrases such as "I pledge", "I will dismiss" and "I will reduce"—I, I, I. The campaign was about the big "I".

The most modest thing in the Queen's Speech is Her Majesty herself. We have seen the struggle across this nation to assert the primacy of party leaders, which will not work and is not working. We are beginning to see a fracture: the Chancellor of the Exchequer had to accompany the Prime Minister to reassure the core voters of an ancient, important political party, which includes old Labour as well as the fading new Labour.

In the Chancellor of the Exchequer we saw Ozymandias and heard the sounds of the winds beginning to blow. We can reflect on all the marvels of new deals, whatever other deals or the computerised economic theories of today, but if they were such a wondrous Government with such a wondrous programme, why could not they induce any more than 22 per cent. of the British electorate to vote for them? Why did they get fewer votes in England?

We have heard the assertions of Front Benchers that they know best, but then we get the further hubris of a Queen's Speech such as this. Six months after the last announcement of 32 Bills, we are now presented with more than 45. However one looks at it, it is really only a political message, like those of Mr. Alastair Campbell: "We'll put this in the Queen's Speech just to tell you what our general intentions are." We have only a few months—until November next year—in which to complete this business. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind), who is sitting on the Front Bench, will be surprised by what has happened to the House since he was last here. This House no longer has the time to discuss anything—it has given over to the Executive the right to determine at the end of a Bill's Second Reading how little time we may have to consider such matters.

I will reflect on just two things that spring out of this long, abysmal, soul-dismaying Queen's Speech of good intentions. The Identity Cards Bill was launched in the last Parliament and it should have full and adequate discussion. When it was put into Committee Upstairs, so limited was the time given to the consideration of a measure that may cost the Exchequer untold sums of money—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, who is an experienced Member of the House, but we are debating a particular amendment to the Queen's Speech, and his remarks ought to be more nearly tailored to that.

Mr. Shepherd: I am grateful, Sir. I am trying, though, to direct myself to legislation that arises out of the substance of the Queen's Speech, and the amendment relates to that.

In the last Parliament, we tabled an amendment, supported by Members on both sides of the House, detailing what was not discussed in relation to the identity cards legislation.

We will also discuss—this touches on the economy—the European Union Bill, which gives unto the European Union, in addition to its existing powers, the ability to make great and profound changes to our social and economic structures in almost every area of central Government. That will not be properly discussed. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea will remember how we anguished for a week over one small section of the Maastricht treaty legislation. The people of this country, whatever view they took, knew that everything was being discussed.

Mr. Salmond: A closer examination of the amendments tabled by the Conservative and by the Liberal parties shows that they are all about what is not in the Queen's Speech. Does not that indicate that both parties want to see more, as opposed to the less that the hon. Gentleman is advocating?

Mr. Shepherd: I am grateful to the leader of the Scottish National party to the extent that regardless of anything else this House will spend the next 18 months trying to assess these measures.

I want us, as Back-Bench Members, to remember that we stand for the people of England, and that in the end we should be able to attest to those whom we represent that we have discussed and debated the matters in the Queen's Speech. We are nothing unless we stand up for those from whom we came. I thank her Gracious Majesty for being so modest, and rest my case.

4.15 pm

Mr. Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton, South-East) (Lab): It is with a deep sense of humility and responsibility that I rise to make my maiden speech as we debate the economic parts of the Queen's Speech. I congratulate all new Members who have made their maiden speeches today.

I begin by paying tribute to my predecessors as hon. Members for Wolverhampton, South-East, Bob Edwards and Dennis Turner. Bob Edwards was elected for what was then the constituency of Bilston in 1955. He was an extraordinary man; a true international socialist whose life and career in politics mirrored not

[Mr. Pat McFadden]

only the struggles of the Labour movement, but the great European conflicts of the past century. A member of the Independent Labour party, he played his part in the slow and often difficult marriage between that organisation and the Labour party. More famously, he fought alongside Jack Jones, George Orwell and many other brave men as a captain in the international brigades during the Spanish civil war. Bob said of the conflict that

"the future of human freedom for the peoples of Europe was being drawn on the map of Spain".

As well as taking part in that epic struggle, Bob claimed a personal acquaintance with, among others, Mao Tse Tung and Leon Trotsky. Those of us who grew up, politically speaking, in the Labour party in the 1980s sometimes felt that we were developing a personal acquaintance with Leon Trotsky, but none of us could match Bob's put-down of one enthusiastic follower, when he replied, "Well that's not what he said to me."

Bob is still remembered with great warmth and admiration in the constituency. When he stood down in 1987, he was succeeded by Dennis Turner. Dennis is a true black country man. He was born and bred there and has lived there all his life. In 1991, he joined the Opposition Whips Office, where he served as education and health Whip, west midlands regional Whip and defence Whip. In more recent years, Dennis was best known as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short), and as Chairman of the Catering Committee. With his characteristic good humour and his conviction that an army marches on its stomach, he set about ensuring that the best possible facilities and quality of food were available for Members and staff alike.

It is rumoured that Dennis literally knows the names of the dogs in the street in the constituency, and after campaigning alongside him during the recent general election, I can well believe that. He is regarded with great love and affection in the area, and I am conscious that I walk in large footsteps as I attempt to succeed him.

The constituency of Wolverhampton, South-East is centred around the black country town of Bilston and stretches through the wards of Ettingshall, East Park and Blakenhall towards Wolverhampton city centre. It is a place with tremendous warmth, strength of spirit and a deep sense of pride. I record my thanks to the people of Bilston and the whole constituency for the welcome and friendship that they have shown to me as a newcomer to the area in recent months. Their spirit and friendship has redoubled my resolve to serve them as best as I possibly can in the years to come.

Since Labour was elected in 1997, real progress has been made in the constituency. Economic stability, low inflation and low interest rates have helped to reduce unemployment by more than 30 per cent. There are 1,600 more doctors and 4,500 more nurses in the area's strategic health authority. There are hundreds more police in the West Midlands police force; 16,000 pensioners receive the winter fuel payment and more than 5,000 receive pension credit. That is all progress, but the challenge for politics and government is not only meeting the problems of today but how we respond to the challenges of the future.

The whole black country once pulsated to the rhythm of production as countless factories and mines poured forth their products for use around the world. Coal, steel, chains, enamel and every type of machine tool was made there. A flavour of the area's proud history and deep sense of community was brought home to me by the wonderful series of collections of photographs of Bilston, Bradley and Ladymoor produced by Ron Davies, the latest of which he sent me during the campaign. Today, many of the old factories and mines have gone, but it would be a grave mistake to say that manufacturing was a thing of the past in the black country. There are still world-class manufacturers in Bilston and the surrounding area. Companies such as Mueller Europe, which I visited last Friday, are investing in modernising their operations, and praise what they regard as a first-class local work force.

Wolverhampton is fortunate in being a well-led city, with good councillors working hard for local people, and many inspiring people working for the local community. I was honoured to meet some of them during the election campaign. They include Jan Barlow and Pauline Bird, whose work with Sure Start has been a huge help to young mothers, Ann Reaney and Biddi Patel, who have set up a city-wide pensioners link line to reach out to elderly people living alone, and Raj Bansal, who is working to give young people the skills to find a job. They and many others bring life to the idea of community. They help us to achieve more together than we ever could alone.

Over the years, Wolverhampton has welcomed immigrants from every corner of Britain and, indeed, from across the world. Today, my constituency is a diverse community, with almost 30 per cent. of its population made up of ethnic minorities. The vast majority of that population are Sikhs, but there are also many Hindus and Muslims. Out of many communities has emerged one, made richer by its different strands, which combine to make the city a better place—not person against person, or community against community, but one community living and working together. During the election, I had the privilege of taking part in the celebrations to mark the Sikh festival of Vasaikhi in the city's West park. It was a wonderful open-air event attended by thousands of people. This annual event has become a vital part of the city's cultural life, and is testament to the warm bonds between people of different faiths and cultures in Wolverhampton.

I believe that Wolverhampton, South-East can look forward to the future with confidence. Manufacturing will remain vital to the area's economy, but there must and will be diversification into services, information technology, distribution and other industries. The Bilston urban village, a new development on old industrial land, will bring vital new housing, leisure facilities and employment opportunities to the area. But more than anything, the area's future must be built on education, skills and opportunity for its people. In this, the Government have done a tremendous job, providing more investment per pupil, more computers, more staff and more modern buildings. I know already, from visiting schools such as Graiseley primary school and meeting head teachers such as Wendy Briscoe, that there is excellent leadership in local schools. This primary school already has a twinning agreement with

Wolverhampton university to introduce children to the aspiration towards higher education from the moment they start school.

For all the progress, however, there is still much more to be done. This Government's work and this party's work are far from over. There is more to be done to ensure that no child is held back by lack of means, more to be done to ensure no child is held back by lack of ambition, more to be done to ensure that if an adult loses a job, they get the training that will give them a second chance. There is also more to be done to get rid of the outdated, misplaced notion that anyone should know their place or that certain paths in life are for some but not for others.

The liberating power of education should mean that every child should be stretched to the utmost of their ability, that they may reach their full potential. We still have a long way to go to make that goal a reality. Just one generation ago, my mother and father went to the same small school, at Meenderry, in the hills of Donegal. For them, there was no chance of further or higher education. The pressures of the times—the pressure to work, to earn and, indeed, to emigrate—closed in all too soon, but they raised seven children and gave all of us a passion for learning. It has served my generation well, and it is a big part of the reason I am standing here today making this maiden speech.

The belief in using the collective power of all to enhance the individual opportunity of each is at the core of what we stand for as a political party. So if there is one thing I commit myself to in this maiden speech, it is to serve as a champion of learning and opportunity for the people of Wolverhampton, South-East. The means by which that goal will be achieved will change over time, and we on the centre left must embrace that change, as we have already had the courage to do in recent years. Nothing—no barrier and no interest—should stand in the way of our mission to spread opportunity. It is only by doing so that we will realise our ambition that people, whatever their means, may realise their full potential in the years to come.

4.24 pm

Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-East (Mr. McFadden) on his maiden speech: he spoke with conviction, eloquence and a manifest desire to get things done, and I wish him well.

It is with a sense of privilege and perhaps some trepidation that I rise to speak on this first occasion. It is a great privilege and honour to be here. Like all right hon. and hon. Members, I look forward to working hard on behalf of my constituents to the very best of my ability. Let me record my appreciation to all Members, and to the staff and officers of the House, for the warmth of their welcome and their support over the last three weeks. Any new role in life is a challenge, and election to the House is no exception.

According to the convention of the House, I am required to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor—a task that I happily undertake. Simon Thomas was a decent and principled man, who worked hard in the House and the constituency. I have learnt quickly from all sides of the high regard in which he was held. He spoke with authority and dedication, not least on the challenges that we face environmentally and on wider global issues, and he was a valued member of the Environmental Audit Committee. During the three elections in which we fought each other we enjoyed a good personal relationship, as is often the case, and I genuinely wish him and his family well.

I am privileged indeed to represent Ceredigion, which is the most beautiful constituency in Wales, if not further afield—although in normal circumstances Members may wish to debate that, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb). Ceredigion stretches from the banks of the River Dyfi in the north, with the spectacular beaches of Borth and Ynys Las, down to the market town of Cardigan on the banks of the River Teifi, thus including much of the beautiful Cardigan bay coastline.

Historically, while beautiful, the land is also demanding. Its farming economy has seen difficult times, producing the culture of work and thrift whence the Cardi's legendary cautious approach to all things financial emanates. It boasts a strong entrepreneurial spirit, but also a radical one. In the 19th century, Cardigan was one of the areas most notorious for the eviction of tenants who voted contrary to their landlords' wishes. One still meets constituents who talk about that.

Ceredigion has some of the best standards of learning in Wales, and per capita spending on children is the highest in Wales. Until a fortnight ago I was a teacher in a small village school in Llangors, in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams), and I can vouch for the huge challenges facing rural schools. Small fluctuations in roll numbers can have a dramatic effect on budgets and staffing, and thereby on children's education. We need stability and a wider assessment of the implications of school closures. All too often, the school is the focal point of the local community.

Ceredigion boasts some of the great institutions of Welsh public life. The university of Aberystwyth, which was my initiation to Ceredigion some 21 years ago, is a fine institution at which to study. Two of my election opponents studied there as well, as did my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Rogerson), who I noticed was proudly wearing his Aberystwyth college scarf on his first day here. There is a particularly acclaimed international politics department, soon to be housed in a new building, and with 10,000 students and nearly 600 staff, the institution is critical to our local economy. No wonder issues of student finance and the funding of higher education are so important to us locally. I look forward to the publication of the Rees commission's report tomorrow, and welcome yesterday's vote in the National Assembly. The university college of Wales Aberystwyth was established in 1872, and was founded very much on the principles of stewardship. It was founded on the basis of "people's pennies"—some 100,000 individual donations, which is a testament to the high esteem in which education is held in Ceredigion.

Aberystwyth is also home to the national library of Wales, which dominates the landscape of Penglais hill. It is the largest library in Wales and one of the world's

[Mark Williams]

largest research libraries, and houses the archives of Lloyd George and Saunders Lewis, priceless mediaeval documents, and church and chapel registers.

We also boast Lampeter university, the oldest degree-awarding institution in Wales, which is, again, critical to the local economy, and there is a healthy town and gown relationship between students and local residents.

The bulk of Ceredigion is farming country with smaller towns such as Aberaeron, Pontrhydfendigaid, Aberporth and Tregaron, which boasts one of the only two functioning farming marts in the county. That is perhaps a sad reflection of the continuing hard times that agriculture faces, which is of importance in a constituency where 10 per cent. of the population are actively employed in the industry. The two biggest concerns of the farming community are excessive regulation and the burgeoning influence of supermarkets. Ceredigion's small family farms remain the backbone of the economy as well as the guardians of much of what we value in the environment.

One particular community has become infamous in some circles: the village of Llanddewi Brefi, home to Dafydd in TV's "Little Britain". Hon. Members who wish to visit that community—Ceredigion has always welcomed visitors—should beware. Llanddewi Brefi is no longer signposted, as eager Dafydd fans have made off with anything bearing the Llanddewi Brefi name, much to the consternation of local residents.

The seaside town of New Quay has worthy associations, too. Dylan Thomas's stays in the town provided much of the inspiration for "Under Milk Wood", although that is open to much debate with the residents of Laugharne in Carmarthenshire, who also claim him as their own.

Such communities epitomise the third fundamental part of Ceredigion's economy after education and agriculture: tourism, particularly along the coast. Many tourist enterprises have been supported by European funding through objective 1. I pay tribute to the work of the local objective 1 partnership. Over the past four years, 1,098 jobs have been created or protected. Some £58 million has been injected into the local economy. I look forward to guarantees from the National Assembly that such provision will continue for West Wales and the Valleys after 2007.

That funding has greatly enhanced the community fabric of my constituency. Two particular schemes are of note: the quayside regeneration and development in Cardigan, and the restoration work under way at the historic Cardigan castle, which was the scene of the first national Eisteddfod in Wales in 1176.

Before I finish, I wish to pay tribute to my last Liberal Democrat predecessor in Ceredigion: Geraint Howells. He served in the House from 1974 to 1992, and then as Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd in another place until his sad death last year. He was held in great affection across the House. He was a true son of Ceredigion; I am an adopted one. He worked tirelessly for all. He was passionate about protecting rural areas from what he perceived as a remote Government, and sought to represent them effectively in Parliament. I hope to follow in that tradition.

Geraint Howells passionately believed in a Welsh Parliament with full legislative powers on a par with the Scottish Parliament. I applaud the recommendation of the all-party Richard commission that the National Assembly should have full legislative powers by 2011. In that vein, I look forward to the Government's White Paper, the Bill that is to follow and the debate that will ensue.

In Geraint Howells' maiden speech, he remarked:

> "It often strikes me as ironical that Cardiganshire gives its children an excellent education, culminating in a range of higher education, only to find . . . there is no work in the county to offer them." [*Official Report*, 14 March 1974, vol. 870, c. 430]

In the Ceredigion of 2005, it is the issue of affordable housing that determines my constituents' capacity to stay. I do not claim any uniqueness for Ceredigion on that issue. Many hon. Members have mentioned it this afternoon. Few communities across Wales are unaffected. What is different is that many of the youngsters who have been forced to move away are Welsh speaking, and 59 per cent. of the people in my constituency speak Welsh as their first language. Therefore, such moves inevitably have a negative effect on language and culture. That is a widespread feeling in my constituency and I share it. With average house prices in Ceredigion more than six times the average income in Ceredigion, I am glad that the Chancellor has started the debate on what needs to be done.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has run out of time.

4.34 pm

Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the latest of 10—I think it was 10—maiden speeches in today's debate. The speeches have given me renewed faith in the vibrancy of our political culture, because of the obvious talents of the people who have spoken today—I will not list them all—and have given me a few holiday ideas for those weekend breaks to which we all aspire, even if we do not manage to take them. I shall go to my map of Great Britain and plan to visit many constituencies after listening to their Members of Parliament waxing lyrical about them. Of course, I am still of the opinion that Wallasey is the centre of the universe.

For all Labour MPs who served in opposition as well as in government in this place, there can be no greater thrill than to speak in a Queen's Speech debate from this sided of the Chamber. To be doing so at the beginning of an unprecedented third term in office for a Labour Government is even more gratifying. In the depths of the Thatcherite wilderness years, when I began my own personal political odyssey, that would have been utterly unthinkable—but here we are.

Labour's achievement is mighty and, some would say, very long overdue. After a tough election, in which we have lost some good and talented colleagues, we find ourselves in a position that none of our predecessors enjoyed—not Attlee, not Bevan, not Bevin. not Wilson, not Healey and not Callaghan: we find ourselves in government for a third term.

We have a precious opportunity that we must not waste. We have earned the chance to embed the changes that we have begun to implement in the very fabric of

our society for the long term. We have earned the opportunity to transform our society profoundly for the better and we have earned the chance to lay solid foundations that will make this century in Britain a Labour century.

I also believe that in the 21st century, the problems that the world will face—climate change, instability and poverty, terrorism—can be solved only by multilateral collective international action and not by market fundamentalism, laissez-faire economic dogma or by retreating from the European Union into isolationism. We must build on the economic stability that has been such a feature of our success to date. This is necessary if we are to make more progress towards our goal of greater social justice. The current Chancellor's achievement here is as unprecedented as our third term in office. He has made a massive contribution to our continued political success and to our real and lasting achievements.

We must build on our progress on poverty elimination, both at home and abroad, if we are to tackle the shameful legacy that we inherited from the Tory years. This condemned millions in our own country to the stunted life chances and narrowed opportunities and unfairness that come with poverty. It did nothing to tackle the scandal of billions of our fellow human beings dying in a world of plenty for want of the basics required to sustain human life.

Finally, we must build on our progress on fairness and equality. No society that hopes to thrive in our increasingly competitive world can afford to tolerate bigotry and discrimination in its ranks. We have made some progress here, but much remains to be done.

This Queen's Speech contains many good and worthy pieces of legislation that will improve our country when they make their way on to the statute book, and I wish to highlight a few. The Consumer Credit Bill makes a welcome, fast return to Labour's programme after it was shamefully blocked by Opposition parties in the dying days of the last Parliament. I had the honour of serving on the Treasury Select Committee in the last Parliament, and aspire to do so again in this one. The House will be aware of the work done by the Treasury Committee on credit cards and the financial services industry generally.

Some consistent themes emerged from our inquiries and the Bill addresses some of the most important. The first is extortionate credit agreements; many Members will remember the court case of London North Securities *v.* Meadows, in which an original debt of £5,000 had ballooned into an astonishing £384,000—all legal under the old legislation, but unfair now. The Bill will also deal with transparency in costs and credit terms, including penalty fees, which are often levied on those least able to pay, at levels disproportionate to the debt that they have taken on. It will also deal with financial exclusion and access to dispute resolution.

Currently, 2 million households in Britain have no real access to financial services and pay much more to get access to credit in a much more vulnerable position than many of us would tolerate. The extra protection from loan sharks and charlatans who prey on the desperate is long overdue, as is a crackdown on the more dubious practices of some of our mainstream companies. The time when people with low borrowing limits can be forced into spiralling debt by hidden and unavoidable penalty charges and then menaced by constant harassment to pay what they cannot pay is, I hope, drawing to a close.

On poverty in the UK, great strides have been made by this Government. The 60 per cent. fall in unemployment in my constituency has helped, as have tax credits and the provision of child care costs. That has given many women with children their first real practical opportunity to go to work. My time on the doorstep in the recent election brought home to me how much these policies are appreciated by women, and it is no coincidence that proportionately more women than men voted Labour in the 2005 election. Indeed, MORI has calculated that if all voters had voted as women did, the Labour majority would be not 66 but 90. I believe that we need to build on the progress that we have made there.

In the past eight years, Labour has raised 1.9 million pensioners out of the absolute poverty in which the Tories left them. At the same time, we have helped 1 million children out of absolute poverty in our own country. If we are to achieve our aim of eliminating child and pensioner poverty, we need an intensification of our drive in these areas.

Abroad, Britain is leading the battle to reshape the agenda on poverty elimination and to strive to achieve the United Nations millennium development goals. The European Union agreement reached yesterday is a tribute to the work of both our Chancellor and Prime Minister, and to the success that they have achieved in shaping the G8 and EU agenda during our presidencies this year. I hope that the Prime Minister's 40,000-mile trek will deliver the engagement of the United States of America, despite some kicking and screaming, in this campaign, and perhaps even ensure that it joins the "Make poverty history" campaign, alongside everybody else.

I welcome the quick reintroduction of the Equality Bill in the Queen's Speech. This is a worthy measure that consolidates some of the good work under way to reinforce the protections that we give our citizens against discrimination. I hope that it speeds its way on to the statute book, but I believe that it needs to be followed equally swiftly by a single equalities measure that will simplify, harmonise and extend the law and protections in this area.

With the gender and race pay gaps still persisting, and even growing in some sectors, we need to do more. We need to do more because there is no general positive duty to promote equality. We need to do more to extend protection from discrimination in the provision of goods and services to our citizens on the grounds of age, belief and sexual orientation. This is not special treatment; it is legislating for respect and fairness, which are the definition of what a Labour Government do.

Respect has been much in the news lately, but I believe that it is a two-way process. Proper respect empowers. It does not humiliate or degrade, or stigmatise or caricature entire generations. Real respect means the creation of a good society that respects people's rights and dignity at work, incorporates fairness and opportunity for all our people, and ensures that everyone is respected as they are and that we hear every voice in our political democracy. I believe that we need

[Angela Eagle]

a more sophisticated debate about respect and about what is happening in the commercialised, media-driven and advertising-dominated culture that is destroying it.

We have a third term in Government. We even have a little Red Book to guide us on our way. It is rather less declamatory than another one of which I have had experience, but it is just as exciting. This will be a challenging and exciting period for Labour Members, and we are looking forward to it with determination and commitment.

4.44 pm

Mr. Mark Hoban (Fareham) (Con): I congratulate hon. Members who have made maiden speeches today, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb), for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries) and for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley). In their eloquence and passion, they demonstrated that they will be doughty champions of their constituencies in this Parliament.

The Chancellor's speech today was characteristic of his speeches on all these occasions. It was full of facts and figures that supported his case, but it carefully ignored those that did not do so. He refused to stand by the forecasts that he made during this year's Budget. At times, he seemed to be preparing the way for breaking the golden rule, but above all, he struck a note of complacency and self-satisfaction. There can be no room for complacency in the running of the economy. No one can afford to take risks with it at the moment. I recently heard an economist say that current economic growth is built on the twin pillars of Government debt and personal debt. We can see from the Red Book that debt is helping to finance higher Government expenditure. For example, the 2002 Red Book forecast what would happen in the current fiscal year. It predicted a surplus of £9 billion and Government expenditure of £444 billion. This year's Red Book shows that public finances have deteriorated over the past three years, and have swung from a surplus of £9 billion to a deficit of £6 billion, with £15 billion used to fund half the increase in spending.

That increase in spending and the Government's problems in meeting their forecast tax revenues have led economists to predict that the Chancellor will have to fill a £10 billion black hole in his next Budget. He can only do so by increasing borrowing, which will take him towards the top of the golden rule, or by raising taxes on hard-pressed businesses and consumers. Strong consumer demand is partly financed by the increase in personal debt. If anyone doubts that relationship, they should look at the headlines that greeted the announcement at the end of the last week that, for the first time in several years, consumers have paid off more on their credit cards than they have put on. Many commentators link the fall in credit card borrowing with the downturn in the high street and the poor results announced last week by some of our major retailers.

We must be careful, however, as it would be wrong to forecast that the end of the world is nigh. People will continue to borrow if they believe that they can afford to service their debt. That will depend on the level of interest rates and their employment prospects, as well as incentives not to spend or borrow but to save. The incentives to save in the present economy are not sufficiently strong, and do not encourage people to put money away for a rainy day in case their employment prospects deteriorate or to save for their pensions. The reform of the pensions system on which the Government are seeking cross-party consensus should look at ways of strengthening incentives to save and providing greater stability for the economy.

In his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Normanton (Ed Balls) referred to the stop-go economy of the post-war period. The Government should consider the way in which they tackle tax changes in the Budget. Too often, the changes that they propose are ill-conceived, ill-considered and ill-thought-through. They distort underlying economic activity and send signals to businesses to embark on projects from which they later have to retreat. Just as the stop-go economic policy of the post-war period sought to fine-tune the economy by reducing taxes or increasing them and introducing credit restrictions when the economy was out of control, so tax changes stimulate activity but then lead the Government to row back when they recognise that they are damaging. Let me cite three examples.

The Government were proud to introduce tax reliefs to stimulate film production in the UK. They were later forced to restrict those reliefs, however, because of the way in which taxpayers had taken advantage of them. If only the Government had thought through that change earlier they might have been able to stop other taxpayers having to subsidise those reliefs through the higher taxes that they had to pay instead.

A couple of years ago, the Government introduced a zero rate of corporation tax. I remember the Paymaster General saying in Committee that that would stimulate enterprise and have a tremendous effect. It also, however, encouraged unincorporated businesses, such as sole traders and partnerships, to incorporate to take advantage of those tax reliefs, not to stimulate economic activity. The Government have therefore had to restrict that tax relief, realising that in trying to drive the economy forward they have made a mistake, as it sends out the wrong signals and encourages the wrong type of activity in our economy.

Not that long ago, the Chancellor announced with a great flourish that he wanted to abolish stamp duty on commercial property transactions in disadvantaged areas, and that that would be a great reform to stimulate property transactions in those areas. The Government sought state aid exemption from the EU, which runs out at the end of 2006. That relief was forecast to cost £50 million. When the Chancellor announced its withdrawal in the Budget, however, the tax saving from which taxpayers would benefit was £350 million. Yet again, a measure that the Government introduced had been ill-thought-through and was costing taxpayers far more than the Government had suggested. As a consequence, people working on property schemes in the areas concerned stopped suddenly, as the relief was withdrawn overnight, and scrambled to complete deals that were in the pipeline.

Such ill-conceived, ill-considered measures harm the stability of the economy. They do not give businesses a secure framework in which to plan their activities, or a stable tax regime in which they can develop long-term projects for the future. Too much of this micro-fiddling

in the economy, with small reliefs and measures that are suddenly taken advantage of and become much more expensive than the Government predicted, ends up distorting business priorities and taking business's eye of the ball.

I spent several years working for a firm of chartered accountants, and I understand some of the issues that businesses consider in relation to long-term projects and some of the taxation issues. The Government need to think carefully about this activism in the economy. In the same way as targets imposed by Government on our health, education and other public services distort the priorities of GPs, teachers in our schools, and nurses and doctors in our hospitals, such activism distorts the priorities of businesses and gets in the way of businesses being run in a way that is right for the economy, their employees and customers.

Let me give this advice to the Treasury Bench at the start of this Parliament: Ministers should look for a more simple, straightforward and above all more stable and predictable tax regime, so that business can continue to flourish and thrive.

4.54 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am most grateful for this opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is a great honour and a privilege. I want to give my congratulations to other hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches this afternoon. They have all spoken with great passion and eloquence, and I look forward to hearing from them again.

I want to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Derek Foster, who held Bishop Auckland from 1979 until the last general election. Wherever I go in the constituency, I hear his praises sung most highly: whether by old-age pensioners in difficult circumstances whom he has helped; or by farmers whom he supported during the foot and mouth epidemic; or, indeed, by the manufacturing engineers, for whom he seems to have provided a network of connections beyond the constituency and into academia. Indeed, Derek seems to have been practising endogenous growth theory before my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Ed Balls) invented it.

Most recently, with Brian Stephens, the former leader of Sedgefield borough council, Derek spearheaded the campaign to set up the Locomotion railway museum in Shildon, which has been a great success, receiving 100,000 visitors and one prize already. It is indeed right that Derek's loyalty and service are to be recognised by ennoblement and transfer to another place.

It is an honour to be the first woman MP for Bishop Auckland, and that honour belongs to Ruth Dalton, who took the seat in a by-election in 1929. Her husband, the then MP for Peckham, had already been selected as the Bishop Auckland candidate for the forthcoming general election when the sitting Member unexpectedly died. Meanwhile, in Peckham the prospective candidate was the sitting MP for Gateshead. Had it not been for the ingenuity of the Bishop Auckland Labour party, instead of one by-election there would have been three, but the whole matter was resolved in two days.

In his excellent biography of Dalton, Ben Pimlott tells us:

> "Without Ruth even attending for interview, the seventy-strong General Committee Bishop Auckland decided unanimously that she should become the by-election candidate. No other name was even mentioned",

because she could be relied on to resign in favour of her husband as soon as Parliament was dissolved, three months later. I fear that the second woman MP for Bishop Auckland will not prove to be reliable in quite the same way.

Bishop Auckland is a remarkable constituency. With its industrial east and rural west it is truly a slice of England, so its needs reflect many of the long-term challenges facing the country as a whole. The former mining villages have long since given way to industry and manufacturing. Spennymoor, Shildon and Bishop Auckland have a strong engineering base, and in Barnard Castle there is a large Glaxo plant. Under this Government's economic stewardship they are thriving. Of course, there have been job losses and restructuring, but the fact is that unemployment now is half its level in 1997. Next month, Electrolux is inaugurating a new production line, securing 600 manufacturing jobs.

Within the constituency the community suffering the most serious deprivation is the Woodhouse Close estate. There, homes are boarded up and bombed out before being demolished. My work on Sure Start first took me to the constituency, and in partnership with voluntary sector groups, led by such capable women as Jane Armstrong, Doreen Kett and Jackie Heslop, Sure Start is making a real contribution to community development and hence to opportunities for children. The Government have set themselves ambitious targets to halve and eradicate child poverty, and I urge Ministers to stick with them. Sure Start is part of that. Equivocal academic evaluations are irrelevant; it was never intended as a quick fix. The full benefits will not be realised for another 20 years.

That part of the constituency is in the Wear Valley district, which has the dubious distinction of being the most deprived rural authority in England. One manifestation of that is that it has the worst obesity rates in the country. In her maiden speech in 1929, Ruth Dalton complained about the quality of school meals, and I am sorry that that was still an issue in the last general election, despite all the good work by my colleagues on Durham county council. I welcome the financial package announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, but I do not believe that the problem of children's diet can be solved through Government spending alone: responsible behaviour on the part of the private sector is also necessary. I therefore welcome the commitment made in the last public health White Paper to introduce legislation if a voluntary code of conduct on advertising during children's television is unsuccessful.

Sweeping up to the west of my constituency is the Tees valley, which passes through some of the most beautiful farmland in England to the Pennines, where there are ski-lifts above Mickle Fell. I am looking forward to testing them in the winter, but now beautiful walks are to be had through the bluebell woods by the river. Hon. Members will not need to be reminded by me that the bluebell is one of our native species most threatened by global warming. I have to report that during the election

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campaign in Bishop Auckland, the need for strong action to meet our Kyoto targets was the one thing on which the candidates of all the major parties agreed. I am especially glad that the Government have made that a priority at the forthcoming G8 meeting.

The Bishop Auckland constituency is also rich in historical sites, including the Roman fort at Binchester, the Saxon church at Escomb, Raby castle and the Bowes fine art museum. I am torn between the feeling that this is a secret best kept for those who know it and the knowledge that there is fantastic potential for tourism in the area. None the less, the beauty can hide serious problems of rural deprivation and isolation as farming communities come to terms with changes in international markets. However, reform of the international trading system cannot be accomplished in a moral vacuum, and I do not believe that that is what my constituents want. One hundred and fifty years of political and social action in County Durham have produced a culture based on the values of solidarity with those less fortunate than ourselves, collective action and standing up for what we believe.

All those issues—jobs, child poverty, the environment and international trade—are, at their root, economic problems, but they are not technical problems requiring technocratic solutions; they are political problems. Labour was re-elected on a programme of reform. The aspiration of Labour Members is that our values should dominate the 21st century in the way that the Tories' did the 20th. That means addressing long-term challenges. That is not an excuse for procrastination: we must tackle urgently those changes that take time to come to fruition.

My sincere desire is to serve my constituents well and represent their views in our debates, so that in 76 years' time, when the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland is describing her constituency, she is no longer worried about school meals, but the children are still enjoying the bluebell woods. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and hon. Members for listening to me this afternoon.

5.3 pm

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): In common with many hon. Members who have spoken today, I rise to make my maiden speech with some trepidation, especially as I am nursing a heavy cold. I hope that the House will forgive me if I splutter during my speech.

I enjoyed the speech we have just heard from the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and all the other maiden speeches that we have heard today and in preceding days. As an amateur psephologist, I have enjoyed hearing the potted political histories and geographical descriptions of many of the constituencies that I have studied in newspaper lists and books over the years. All new Members are united in our enthusiasm for talking about our constituencies.

Bristol, West includes the city centre and most of the famous landmarks and institutions of the city. At the eastern edge is Temple Meads station, the original terminus of Brunel's Great Western Railway—a station and a line with which I am now becoming extremely familiar. The western boundary is formed by the Avon gorge, which is bridged by Brunel's Clifton suspension bridge—probably the iconic image of Bristol that is known throughout the world. To the south lies the harbour from where John Cabot sailed to Newfoundland in 1497 and, in the 19th century, Brunel launched his ships, which transformed voyages to all parts of the globe. A replica of Cabot's Mathew and the ongoing restoration of Brunel's SS Great Britain are now key attractions in Bristol's vibrant harbourside. The city's maritime heritage co-exists with the arts and media centres around the harbour, including the Watershed media centre, of which I have been a long-standing director and the Arnolfini gallery, as well as many commercial and leisure developments that are transforming the economy of the city centre.

Within these boundaries is a great variety of communities. In the south-east, there is St. Pauls, which every summer hosts a colourful carnival that attracts visitors from throughout the country. It is a fixed and popular reminder of diverse multi-cultural Bristol. In the west end, we have the elegant Georgian squares and crescents of Clifton and my own neighbourhood, Kingsdown. Forty years ago these areas were in decline. Now, again, they are once more the most desirable housing districts in Bristol, with the fashionable shops and coffee houses that characterised them when they were laid out in the 18th century.

To the north, over the downs, Bristol's precious expanse of green space that is protected by an Act of Parliament, there lies Westbury on Trym. It is a community with a history as long as that of the city of Bristol, into which it has been subsumed. It still retains as its centre a distinct village feel.

In the midst of these communities lie the Edwardian and 1930s suburbs that characterise Bristol, West. They are home to the thousands of professionals, managers, academics, students and Government workers that comprise so many of my constituents. At the heart of all this lies Bristol university. The university, together with the university of the West of England, makes a huge contribution to the life of the city. The research that takes place, particularly in engineering, togethef with the work of Airbus, which is just outside my constituency, makes me proud to represent a city that has an illustrious history but is also one where the future is being made.

Last night, I attended the all-party parliamentary university group and dined with a roomful of vice-chancellors, including the vice-chancellor of Bristol. It brought home to me that as a Member of this place I shall have access to individuals and to viewpoints that previously have been unavailable to me. As a new Member, there will be many opportunities for me to listen and learn, as well as having a platform for my own views.

I am proud to be an alumnus of Bristol university. I went there from Mountain Ash comprehensive school in south Wales. I hope that they will not mind me saying so, but the Minister for the Middle East, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), and the right hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) are also alumni of the school. That is not bad for a school in one of the most deprived communities in the country. I have to say that if I were faced with the same financial arrangements that the Government have now put in

place for students, I am not sure that I would have gone to Bristol university. In some way, I think that my life might have been somewhat different.

Since graduating from Bristol in history, I qualified as a member of the Chartered Institute of Taxation. To amend slightly the words of Jefferson, in this place there is always history and taxes. I hope that my twin disciplines may be of some use in debates in future.

Two summers ago, purely for recreation, I researched the political history of Bristol. It was useful preparation for today, although I did not know so at the time. The city and county of Bristol, from the earliest days of Parliament, sent two representatives to the House. Since the glorious revolution of 1689, the electors often used their dual franchise to return both a Whig and a Tory Member. In the early 18th century, elections turned on the protection of the West India trade or the emancipation of slaves. Once that issue was settled for the better, there was the issue of electoral reform, an issue that led to riots in the city in 1831.

In 1885, the city was split into four constituencies, each with one Member, each of them elected by the single vote. That pattern was replicated throughout the country. It exists to this day, and it is responsible for bringing us all to this place. From 1885 to 1997, there were 112 years of unbroken Conservative representation in Bristol, West. There was a succession of Conservative grandees, from Sir Michael Hicks-Beech, whose crest adorns the Chamber—as I noticed today—to Oliver Stanley and Walter Monckton through to William Waldegrave, who was vanquished in 1997. I shall speak of my Labour predecessor in a moment.

In 2005, I was elected as the first Liberal ever to represent Bristol, West and the first Liberal in the city for 70 years. I was the first ever within the city's boundaries to be elected in a genuine three-cornered contest. The three-way fight in Bristol, West in the last general election attracted attention from around the country as, supposedly, the most interesting contest in the election. A media cavalcade descended on Bristol, West. So did the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and half the Cabinet. I do not think they came to marvel at the achievements of Brunel or to take coffee in Clifton, but their political tourism was to no avail.

Why was the election in Bristol, West ferociously fought, whereas in the rest of the city the election was—I am sure the hon. Members involved will not my mind my saying—a relatively quiet affair? Why was the election in Bristol, West perceived as having a chance of changing the composition of the House, whereas the same was not said of the rest of the city? How can it be that the votes of the electors of Clifton in my constituency carried more weight than those of the electors of Lawrence Hill, Windmill Hill or Avonmouth in the other three city constituencies?

First past the post is a fine way to settle a bet on a dog race, but it is no way to determine the government of our country. In the Queen's Speech there is reference to means to adapt electoral administration. I am sure there is much good work to be done, most notably on postal voting and electoral registration, but we do not need to tinker with the existing electoral system. We need to reform it radically, sweep away first past the post and introduce a system of fair votes.

Electoral reform is an issue that unites me and my immediate predecessor. I have known Valerie Davey for more than 12 years, since we were both elected to the now defunct Avon county council. She was a shining example to me of the fact that there are decent people in all political parties who are doing their best for their communities. For the past eight years she served Bristol, West diligently as a constituency Member, and I know that for many people who decided for national political reasons to part company with the Labour party on this occasion, it was a wrench to part company with Valerie. I wish her well for the future.

I end with a reference to perhaps our most illustrious predecessor in Bristol, Edmund Burke. I noticed in the Members Dining Room a couple of evenings ago that in the caption underneath his portrait, it is recorded that he once spoke in the previous Chamber for more than four days. I am not sure what he would have made of the 10-minute deadline that is crunching down on me. On his statue in the city centre in Bristol is an extract from his hustings speech at the 1780 general election, which reads:

> "I want to be a Member of Parliament to have my share of doing good and of resisting evil."

I am sure that is a maxim that all his successors have tried to uphold, and I will certainly attempt to adhere to it during my membership of the House.

5.12 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to take part in the debate. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) on his maiden speech, and all the other Members who have made their maiden speech today. I should like to make special mention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), who has tirelessly served the people of Northern Ireland and Wales for so long.

Over the past week we have been debating the Government's programme for the forthcoming year and a half. We face many challenges, but we have built a sound base and delivered the longest period of economic growth in modern history. To maintain that success, we need successful industries and businesses generating income and jobs and making sure that Britain moves forward in the face of tough international competition.

Airbus UK is at the forefront of meeting that challenge. The hon. Member for Bristol, West mentioned Airbus, and it is clearly important in his area as well. It shows that European co-operation can deliver a world-beating company. I am delighted that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor found time to visit Airbus UK's Broughton site during the election campaign and to meet some of the company's numerous apprentices. Airbus UK provides tangible evidence of what can be achieved when we invest for the future. The company represents one of the UK's most knowledge-intensive industries, requiring a highly skilled work force applying the latest technologies and the use of high precision, lean manufacturing processes. Working in partnership with its trade unions, it is a model that many other industries could follow.

However, just as no country, not even the most successful, can take its prosperity for granted, nor can any company. Just as there is a need for the Government

[Mark Tami]

to pursue policies that entrench stability and promote long-term growth, so, too, companies must adapt and innovate to secure the very same long-term growth and success.

Following the successful first flight of the A380, attention is now focused on the A350, the new long-range aircraft—the hub-to-point aircraft, as it is known. That market is expected to grow by 35 per cent. over the next 20 years, and the A350 would provide a competitive Airbus product to meet that need.

For Airbus UK, the A350 poses both opportunity and threat. The company, which employs 13,000 people and supports an estimated 135,000 UK jobs, plays a leading role globally in wing design, technology and manufacturing. Airbus UK and its supply chain undertake the design and production of the wing, landing gear and fuel systems integration. However, that leadership is based on a metallic wing solution, while the A350 marks the beginning of the next era in wing technology, which is the large-scale use of composites.

The future for Airbus overall is composites. However, because many composites have already been used in current products, namely the A380 and the planned A400M, the military transport aircraft, composite design and technology expertise has been built up over the years in many Airbus sites, namely those in Germany and Spain. While the UK has developed experience in this technology, the A350 is the first Airbus civil product with the wing primary structure made largely from composite. Airbus is now considering investments for this product and the decisions on work-sharing activities, and it is important that those decisions be taken in the near future.

Success for the UK in winning the A350 would mean the creation of almost 11,000 jobs in the aerospace sector and a further 21,600 jobs being supported in the wider economy through induced employment. Those will be long-term jobs and many of them will be highly skilled. It is well known that other Airbus countries, namely Germany and Spain, are keen to see those high-value jobs brought to their sites. Whoever secures the work on the A350 will be much better placed for the future and the next generation of aircraft, as the decision on the A350 will have a significant bearing on where that work and investment will go.

In order for Airbus UK to win this vital wing business, considerable investment in new engineering and manufacturing facilities and work force training in composite processes is needed. Airbus has therefore applied to the Government for repayable launch investment for the A350. As Airbus is a successful company, one may ask why the British taxpayer should stump up repayable launch aid for it. But why should we not invest in success? In the past Governments of all political colours have tended to respond only to crisis and collapse, often with little long-term gain. For aircraft manufacturers, development costs in the industry are often greater than the total share capital of the company developing a new aircraft, while the pay-back period for these costs can be over a 15 to 20-year cycle. The financial markets do not find that particularly attractive, so Government commitment via repayable launch investment is a key method of ensuring market confidence. As a public-private partnership, the process works very well. Without it the UK will lose out to other European countries that already have competence in the area.

Quite apart from all those arguments, repayable launch investment is a sensible decision for the British taxpayer because it is repayable. For example, the Government supplied £250 million in repayable launch investment towards the A320. Repayments from Airbus UK to the Treasury now total more than twice that amount and continue to grow with each aircraft, with royalties being paid.

If we mean what we say about wanting to build a true partnership with industry, to invest in science and skills, to develop high-tech modern manufacturing and to build prosperity for Britain in a global economy, we must not, at this crucial moment, turn our backs on the potential of Airbus UK. Nor should we be intimidated by the loud, self-serving voices of some of our American cousins, whose cries of principled objection to repayable launch investments surface only in the wake of Boeing's lost market share. While we would all like the disagreement between the United States and the European Union to be concluded, that conclusion must reflect the fact that although Airbus receives direct but repayable loans from EU member countries, Boeing receives huge subsidies, be they in the form of NASA or Department of Defence contracts, or even of tax breaks.

Europe has been accustomed over the years to American allegations of unfair subsidies to Airbus. US hostility tends to intensify when Airbus launches a new plane or opens up a significant lead in the marketplace. That Boeing is comfortable with direct subsidy for aircraft manufacture is evident from the fact that its strategic partners in Japan are funding a share of the development of the 7E7 Dreamliner. Japanese partners are to receive repayable grants and, in addition, other low-interest repayable loans will come from the Development Bank of Japan. They will be worth almost $1 billion in total. Boeing's Japanese partners on the 7E7 will receive more than $1.4 billion in subsidy, and some of that will not even be repayable. That demonstrates that the direct support which Boeing and the US Government believe is completely unjustified when adopted in Europe is acceptable if granted to a partner working on the Boeing programme.

Airbus UK's application for repayable launch investment for the A350 represents an opportunity for the Government to work in partnership with industry, to invest in high-skilled jobs and to prepare and equip our nation for the challenges ahead. It is an opportunity to build our modern manufacturing strength and to ensure British leadership in science, enterprise, education and trade. Let us not pass up that prospect for long-term growth and prosperity, and let us ensure that our aerospace industry leads the world.

5.22 pm

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches during the debate on the Gracious Speech. I came to the House in 1983, representing the constituency of Mid-Ulster. I was here until 1997, when that constituency was ravaged by boundary changes and I was therefore no longer its Member of Parliament.

I did, however, return in 2000 at a by-election, representing the new constituency of South Antrim, only to be defeated in the 2001 election some eight months later.

Of course, patience is a virtue, and they say that all good things come to those who wait. I was therefore willing, because of my conviction to represent the people of Northern Ireland and the constituency of South Antrim, to take up that challenge again. Although I was not the constituency's Member of Parliament, I continued to represent, and to be active in, South Antrim. Such activity was rewarded by its people, and I am greatly honoured to return to the House. I do so with fresh vigour and excitement, and I am willing to help to meet many of the challenges that face the people of Northern Ireland in general, and of South Antrim in particular.

I have one regret and sorrow, which is that my mother did not live to see this day as she passed away at the election's commencement. However, it is an honour to be here and to speak for the good people of South Antrim in this honourable House.

I listened with care to the Chancellor's speech. He boasted about the UK's economy and said that it was enjoying stability while countries such as America, Japan and Germany were passing through, or had passed through, recession. He said that we have the fastest growing economy and—as any Government would desire to do—he painted a picture in which everything seems to be rosy in the garden.

I need to remind this Government that we must maintain some humility. The attainment of our successes is due not only to ourselves, but to the foundation laid by others and to the hard work that the people of the United Kingdom have put in. In their third term, the Government face the danger of complacency. The speeches praising the Chancellor and the excellence of the present moment have been rather smug. Downturns may occur as well as upturns, so society must maintain a degree of humility. We appreciate the prosperity that we are enjoying, but it involves not only the Government, but the people of the United Kingdom, and we should praise everyone who has played a part in that success.

We must acknowledge that the present situation masks many problems. South Antrim is the most beautiful part of the country. All the new Members say that their constituencies are the most beautiful, and they are right to think it, but I say that South Antrim is the best of all. Although my constituency is affluent and prosperous, many citizens are not enjoying that prosperity, and we must acknowledge such deprivation. Many large estates in my constituency, whether they are in the Antrim borough council area or the Newtownabbey borough council area, do not enjoy the same blessings and prosperity as other areas, and many of the people who live there are trapped within the benefits system.

Regeneration is urgently needed in Antrim and Ballyclare. Many such issues are not the sole responsibility of the Government, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or Northern Ireland Ministers, but we need Government help to tackle them and to ensure that we bring prosperity to the whole of the United Kingdom.

During the election, I listened to the debate between the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and others in which the Government described the prosperity of the UK economy. In Northern Ireland, the debate was different. On education, for example, the education boards are continually being told to cut back. When the Government were discussing how many new schools to build, head teachers were asking me about the teachers who will teach in those schools, the classroom assistants who are currently being made redundant and the removal of school patrol men and women, who allow children to be safe when they go in and out of school. Today, the Chancellor discussed the new pre-schools and after-schools, but many such schools already exist in Northern Ireland, and they are closing because of a lack of funding, so we must be realistic.

On hospitals, we lack nurses and doctors, and waiting times are almost the longest in the UK. Many people lie on trolleys for hours in our hospitals.

Our planning service is currently in chaos. It seems to be unable to issue planning decisions or even to make planning decisions. It is, however, glad to issue some decisions quickly—for example, the approval of the super dump at Cottonmount or the decision on the asbestos site at Crumlin, which was approved by the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela E Smith), in one of her last decisions before the election and against the will of the people.

The agricultural industry faces crisis, but the Chancellor did not paint such a picture in today's economic statement. It faces many challenges such as the nitrates directive and the phosphates directive, which come from Europe. Legislation is being heaped on an industry that has faced so many crises that it cannot cope with the challenges that it faces.

I heard the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) speak today. When he was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, he listened very carefully, and I appreciated the grace with which he received Members of Parliament and Assembly Members. I thank him for his service to Northern Ireland.

The Democratic Unionist party has the mandate of the people. We are the only party to return from the general election with an 80 per cent. increase in its MPs, and I am delighted to be part of the team.

It is easy for other Members to tell us about how Northern Ireland is moving on, but if one reads the Independent Monitoring Commission report, one will find that the terrorists are still there at this very moment. The Provisional IRA is recruiting, training and re-arming. The terrorists have not gone away, and they threaten the whole system of democracy of this United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland.

There is no place for terrorists in government in Northern Ireland. The Government had better realise that the day of pushover Unionism is finished and that Northern Ireland has a Unionism that is vibrant, confident, and no longer on its knees. It is standing tall and facing all the challenges. My party will accept the challenges that we face and the responsibility that is laid upon our shoulders as the leaders of Unionism. Much of my party's success is due to the stamina, courage and diligence of its leader and deputy leader, even in days of

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hardship when they were being maligned by so many on the political scene. They stood for the principles of traditional Unionist values, and we are proud that we are able to join as a united team here to further the cause of the people of Northern Ireland.

I am honoured to represent the people of South Antrim. I long for the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland, but I will make it abundantly clear that there is no room for terrorists at the centre of Government. The day that we want to see is one on which peace and democracy is restored to this United Kingdom, and that will not happen with terrorists at the very heart of our Government. I urge the Government to accept the challenge of telling the terrorists that they are not needed or wanted, and must be defeated instead of crawled to.

5.32 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise to make my maiden speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Antrim (Dr. McCrea) and all the other hon. Members who spoke before me. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Ed Balls), who shares a boundary with me in Wakefield. I look forward to working with him and with my hon. Friends the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) and for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) in making our district better.

I wish to speak briefly on the welfare reform Bills proposed in the Queen's Speech. Before I do so, I should like to pay tribute to my predecessors and to say a few words about the constituency that they represented so well. David Hinchliffe was Wakefield's MP from 1987 until this election, and will long retain the admiration of the House and the gratitude of his constituents. David was Wakefield born and bred. A Wakefield councillor and social worker, he brought deep, practical knowledge to his work here, first as a shadow health spokesperson and later as a fearless Chairman of the Select Committee on Health. His Committee's reports on elder abuse, childhood obesity and the pharmaceuticals industry are landmark documents that stand as models for the future. In David's maiden speech in 1987, he spoke of his sorrow at the closure of six mines in the constituency, which left 5,000 people out of work. Today, that figure has been reduced by more than 75 per cent.; I salute the Government for that tremendous achievement.

David was also a politician with a hinterland. He loves rugby league and our local team, the Wakefield Trinity Wildcats. He wrote a book on the struggle to get rugby league recognised as equal to the union game, called, bluntly, "Class War". His wife Julia helped him brilliantly throughout his long career. I wish them both every happiness for a long and satisfying retirement.

Walter Harrison, a legendary Whip in James Callaghan's Government, represented Wakefield from 1965 to 1987. In Walter's maiden speech 40 years ago, he railed against the north-south divide. I am glad that the Government have set up the Northern Way taskforce to narrow the gap in prosperity between the regions. I look forward to playing my part in that work.

Wakefield was fortunate to have such worthy Members of Parliament. I am proud to follow in their footsteps, as Wakefield's first woman MP.

Unlike David and Walter, I was not born in Wakefield. My parents came to Coventry from Ireland and Northern Ireland in the 1960s to work. When people criticise economic migration, I take it personally. My parents taught me that education and employment are paths to a better life and that access to them should not depend on colour or country of origin. That passionate belief led me to the House to represent Wakefield.

The Wakefield constituency includes Wakefield city and a large rural area to the south-west. It includes the parishes of Denby Dale, Kirkburton, Crigglestone, Bretton and parts of Sitlington. Denby Dale is known as the pie village, famous since 1788 for its huge celebration pies. At the national coal mining museum in Overton, visitors can take a guided tour underground to hear how children as young as five were exploited by pit owners. The area has a proud industrial history, which is built on mining and weaving. However, I believe that its future lies in tourism, culture and the arts.

Wakefield will soon be known as the home of British sculpture. Dame Barbara Hepworth was our city's most famous daughter and bequeathed much of her work to the city. We hope that the Heritage Lottery Fund will provide the final piece of funding to build a brand new Hepworth gallery on the banks of the River Calder. The constituency is already fortunate to have the internationally acclaimed Yorkshire sculpture park, where sheep graze among sculptures by Hepworth, Henry Moore and Anthony Gormley. I sincerely recommend the tranquillity of the park to Conservative Members, who may need some time to reflect before the exertions of the autumn's leadership campaign.

Wakefield was known in times past as the "merrie city", mainly for its large number of historic pubs and fine local ales. We all know the problems that excessive drinking causes, but I salute Wakefield's police, local council and our local newspaper, the *Wakefield Express*. Their Streetsafe campaign has begun to tackle drink-related disorder in the city centre, allowing the law-abiding majority to enjoy a great night out.

Wakefield people have experienced great improvements in the past few years but more needs to be done to tackle poverty. In our three city centre wards, more than a quarter of children still live in poverty. We must move further and faster to make child poverty history for the children of Wakefield and this country. During the election campaign, one mother whom I met at the school gates whispered to me that the child tax credit was "the best thing your Government's ever done." I look forward to debating the new work and families Bill, which will give mothers more flexible maternity leave and pay.

I recently visited the Lupset Sure Start centre to hear how it and its return-to-work courses were transforming the lives of local families. I look forward to visiting the Castle children's centre in June where I will discuss with parents and staff the Government's plans to increase flexibility and choice in child care.

Our children and young people are our most precious asset. I am glad that Sir Michael Bichard's recommendations to protect vulnerable groups will

soon become law. Michael and I served together as trustees of Rathbone, a national charity that provides training for the most disadvantaged young people—those who are not in education, employment or training. At Rathbone's Wakefield centre, I saw the impact of poverty on those young people. I know how the skilled and loving care of staff and the patience of employers will restore their connection to society through the dignity of work.

We must do more to help the working poor—those without children on low incomes who struggle each month to make ends meet. I met several people during the election campaign who wondered aloud whether they would be better off on benefit. I passionately believe that work must pay. I welcome the work of the GMB, Unison and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers in tacking low pay with the Government through the minimum wage. Now we must make it truly a living wage.

As someone who has suffered severe hearing loss, I want to do more for disabled people. We must do more to help the disabled to keep their jobs and provide better advice when they are unable to work. I welcome the reform of incapacity benefit if it will allow those disabled people whom society has forgotten the dignity, comradeship and prosperity that work brings.

Last weekend, I had dinner with a constituent, who, like my parents, is an economic migrant. He is a man in his 50s with little English and he told me that he wants to train as a gas engineer. He has already built his house extension and he wants to work in the wider community. Wakefield needs his skills; this country needs his skills. As we look to increase access to work, I hope that we can examine the specific needs of carers, disabled people and those for whom English is a second language.

I thank hon. Members for listening. I thank the people of Wakefield for the great trust that they have put in me and I look forward to working with my right hon. and hon. Friends in Government to deliver greater prosperity for them and a brighter future for their children.

5.39 pm

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the honour of making my maiden speech during the debate on the Queen's Speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and all the other hon. Members who have made their maiden speech today.

During my short time as the Member for Manchester, Withington, I have been careful to pay heed to the advice that has been offered by family, friends and colleagues, not to mention by opponents. The first piece of advice that I received was that I should not allow this place to change me. I have always believed that speeches should be short and to the point and, given the Speaker's advice, the House can be reassured that I shall not allow this place to change my view on that, regardless of any desire to emulate certain hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I should like to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Keith Bradley. He was always forthright in his opinions, as all Members from the north-west should be. This was ably demonstrated in his maiden speech, in which he challenged the former Conservative Government's Finance Bill. Setting aside political differences and intense political rivalry, I am in no doubt that Keith Bradley represented his constituents with great determination and gave them 100 per cent. of his support. I want to thank him for helpfully encouraging people to contact me since the election. I am sure that the people of Manchester, Withington will wish him well for the future, as do I.

Manchester, Withington is the vibrant heart of south Manchester, with an increasing population as more and more people choose to live and socialise in its south Manchester towns. People take pride in the area and play an active role in the numerous civic societies, residents' groups and tenants' associations. The constituency is also home to part of the Mersey valley, with its numerous open spaces and parks; it is a real green lung for south Manchester. The area is also home to several conservation areas that protect our heritage and architecture, and to the famous Christie hospital.

The election on 5 May marked a turning point for Manchester. It is no longer represented only by Labour Members of Parliament, and now has its first Liberal Democrat or Liberal MP since before the second world war. The people of Manchester, Withington rejected the increasingly authoritarian and illiberal Government agenda in favour of policies based on fairness and trust. It is therefore disappointing that plans remain for the introduction of identity cards. I strongly believe that the residents of my constituency would prefer to see that money being better spent on putting more police officers on the streets of Chorlton, Didsbury, Withington, Burnage, Ladybarn and Fallowfield.

The people of south Manchester are equally dismayed to have heard no mention of light rail transport in the Queen's Speech. Manchester's Metrolink has been a resounding success in tackling congestion on the roads that it serves. The over-development of certain parts of south Manchester has placed an unacceptable burden on our roads, causing serious congestion and pollution problems. Metrolink is the key to tackling that congestion, and it must be a top priority.

I would like to welcome the proposals to encourage greater participation in elections. Unfortunately, however, I remain unconvinced that the Government's proposals are what is required. Turnout in Manchester, Withington during the election was up five percentage points, mainly due to the intense competition there. However, many people chose not to vote. They felt that their vote would be wasted because their party of choice had no chance of winning. Surely the most effective way of increasing participation is to introduce not voting gimmicks but a system in which every vote counts.

I warmly welcome the Government's assurances that they will use the presidency of the G8 to secure progress on tackling poverty in Africa and on climate change. The many thousands of pounds raised in Manchester, Withington for the tsunami appeal show the generosity of Manchester people and their commitment to helping to alleviate poverty. The Government must seize this opportunity and lead the way for other countries to follow, both on poverty and climate change.

[Mr. John Leech]

When I was preparing my maiden speech, I took the opportunity to check on what my predecessors had had to say. I was initially alarmed to find that Mr. Fred Silvester, who represented the constituency from 1974 to 1987, had made not a maiden speech but a reincarnation speech. However, I am informed—reliably, I trust—that he had not come into Parliament from beyond the grave; he had previously been the Member of Parliament for Walthamstow. In any event, Mr. Silvester spoke in the rate support grant debate, highlighting the inequities of local government taxation for residents of Manchester, Withington. Some things clearly never change.

There are many losers under the current council tax system, especially pensioners and low earners, who continue to spend a much greater proportion of their incomes on council tax than the most well off. Many people in Manchester, Withington would have liked council tax to be abolished and replaced by a local income tax based on ability to pay.

For the last 18 years, the constituency has been ably represented by Keith Bradley. In his maiden speech, he rightly highlighted the plight of the health service in Manchester, Withington and what he described as the crisis in our hospitals, the closure of the accident and emergency department at Withington hospital at weekends and the threats to cancer services at Christie hospital. It is amazing what a difference a period in government has made. Despite the closure of Withington as a full general hospital, the new community hospital is described as a success for the Labour Government. But although I look forward to taking up an invitation to visit the excellent new Withington community hospital facilities in the next few weeks, the people of Manchester, Withington have not forgotten that their hospital was closed under the Labour Government.

Back in 1987, Mr. Bradley told the House of the threats to cancer services at Christie hospital. Just before this election, 60 doctors from the hospital expressed concern in our excellent local newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*, that a review of cancer services by the strategic health authority could result in the removal of services from the hospital, and that that could threaten its future. This time, Labour described it as scaremongering.

Christie hospital has a clear vision for the future: to transform itself from a regional centre of excellence to a world-class facility. That vision is backed by Manchester university, and by Cancer Research UK. I share it, and as Withington's Member of Parliament I will try to help make it a reality. I am delighted to learn that the green light has been given for the critical care unit, but we must ensure that the strategic health authority supports the hospital's plans in its review.

I welcome the assurance that education remains a top priority. In Manchester, Withington we are fortunate enough to have some of the best schools in Manchester, and over the last nine years I have been fortunate enough to see at first hand the success of two of those schools, as a school governor at Cavendish and Chorlton Park primary schools. Their success is a testament to the hard work of teachers and non-teaching staff, supported by strong governing bodies. Over the next Parliament I hope to forge strong links with all schools in the constituency. I have already visited one, Brookburn school: it was my first official visit as a Member of Parliament.

The biggest challenge for education in south Manchester is the lack of available places for an expanding population. In some parts of the constituency, parents cannot send their children to the schools of their choice because they live too far away to receive a place according to the distance criteria. That emphasises the problem of choice in schools. In fact, for most people in my constituency there is no choice. The lack of available places is a big challenge facing south Manchester, and one of the many challenges that I will face as Member of Parliament for Manchester, Withington. I hope that I will rise to the challenge, and I thank the people of Manchester, Withington for giving me the opportunity.

5.48 pm

Roger Berry (Kingswood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I will speak briefly, as others wish to contribute. I congratulate all who have made their maiden speeches today, and those who may yet do so, and wish them well during their service as Members of Parliament. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) for his kind comments about his predecessor Valerie Davey, who is a close friend of many of us in the House. She is a person of enormous integrity, and served with excellence as Member of Parliament for Bristol, West. I really appreciated the hon. Gentleman's tribute to her work.

I want to focus on the Government's welcome proposals to help those receiving incapacity benefit and those who may find themselves receiving it without intervention, but first I want to say a little about the economy. My abiding memory of the election in Kingswood is that as we raced up and down the streets during the day, it was incredibly difficult to find anyone of working age at home. That, of course, is because the overwhelming majority were in work. The contrast between the situation in my constituency now and the situation when I was first elected in 1992 makes me wonder whether I am more shocked by the fact that the shadow Chancellor had no economic policy to put before the House, or by the collective amnesia among the Conservatives in relation to what they did to our economy when they were in office.

When I was first elected to the House 12 years ago, 3 million people were unemployed in this country and long-term unemployment in my constituency of Kingswood was at record levels. Interest rates and home repossessions were at record levels. The record now, after eight years of a Labour Government, bears interesting comparison. I am proud to be a supporter of a Government who have delivered on the economy the way this Government have delivered over the past eight years. The Chancellor and all his colleagues on the Labour Benches can be proud of that record.

It is not a question—I would say this to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Dr. McCrea) but he is not in his place—of being complacent. There is much more to do and I will come on to that. However, the position today is radically different from the position bequeathed by the Conservative Administration.

As we all know and as is widely agreed, about 1 million people on capacity-related benefits wish to work. A lot of nonsense can be found in sections of the

press in relation to ineapacity benefit. I do not have time to go through some of the awful stuff that I have read over the years, but let me make one point. Some sections of the press seem to think that people can simply pop along to a GP, get a sick note and end up on incapacity benefit for life.

All right hon. and hon. Members will know from talking to their constituents that life is not like that. Constituents who are sick or disabled and cannot work have real difficulty persuading not their local GP but a Department for Work and Pensions-appointed doctor that they are entitled to the benefit. Of those who appeal against refusal, 50 per cent. end up getting the benefit. That does not suggest that the initial appraisal is over-generous. Indeed, it is not.

The problem is not that there are people in receipt of capacity-related benefits who should not be getting them because they do not meet the criteria—they do meet them. The problem is that, as I say, about 1 million people on capacity-related benefits wish to work. With the proper support, they can secure employment.

The obvious question is why those people are not in work now. It could be because of a lack of accessible transport, discrimination at work, inadequate adaptations at work, a lack of appropriate personalised training, or the risk of loss of benefit—it could be one of many factors, which the Government have already begun to deal with. The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 deals with a number of areas of discrimination that prevent disabled people from getting to work. Under the present Government, there has been a substantial increase in funding the access to work initiative, which is clearly an important policy. We have also had the pathways to work pilot projects, which have been a great success. I was delighted the Prime Minister's strategy unit report of January on improving the life chances of disabled people emphasised the positive things that Government should do to prevent people who are running the risk of losing a job due to a disability from even going on to incapacity benefit in the first place. They included measures to ensure that they can retain their job, and help for those who are on incapacity benefit to get back to work.

I welcome the Government's promise of more financial support for disabled people who are looking for work. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will no doubt comment but I am not sure that calling it a rehabilitation support allowance is the neatest way to describe the benefit. However, the principle is right—it has probably changed its name by now. It is right that people who are accepting work-related advice should be paid more than is currently available on incapacity benefit. It is also correct that those who, sadly, will never be able to work should receive more support, as the Government propose under the scheme.

Incapacity benefit is not a generous benefit; an average of £84 or £85 a week, or £4,000 a year, is not generous by any means. Those unable to work should receive more support and I welcome the Government's commitment to that. I look forward to the draft welfare reform Bill, which will reflect the five-year strategy for the DWP that we saw earlier this year, and is something on which we can make progress.

I am still surprised that the perception in some quarters of the popular press of people on incapacity benefit tends to be negative. I, too, will invoke the word respect. I have read things in newspapers that show no respect whatever for people who are unable to work because of their disability. That is not good enough. I welcome the fact that, under the DDA, all public sector bodies have a duty to promote positive attitudes and equality between disabled and non-disabled people, which will get people thinking positively about what people can do.

I should like the Government to reassure the House about the speed of the roll-out of the pathways to work project. From October this year, the scheme will be extended to around a third of the country. It is important that we have an assurance that there will be a nationwide roll-out of the scheme, the main vehicle for supporting people on incapacity benefit back into work, before the reforms are introduced. We also need an assurance that the work of personal advisers, which is so crucial to the scheme, will be of the highest possible quality.

I hope that as there have been close consultations with the disabled community on these matters so far, the detail of the proposals will be developed in consultation with disabled people's organisations such as the Disability Rights Commission and others.There are details that the House would wish to consider, but, in conclusion, I welcome the policy to extend opportunities for disabled people who have found themselves on incapacity benefit. We should all strongly support that positive policy and I hope that it commands cross-party support in due course.

5.57 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): We have had 14 excellent maiden speeches today, and I pay tribute to them all. They showed charm, humour, clarity and sometimes passion. At least two Members mentioned their local paper. Those two will go far, I am sure.

I start by congratulating the Government on starting on their ambitious and right programme to achieve the millennium development goals and to tackle world poverty. We need cross-party support on that measure. Unfortunately, that is where my charity ends, because I have mixed feelings about this Queen's Speech. It sets a very heavy programme with some good measures that we can support, subject to detailed legislation. However, with its emphasis on quantity rather than quality, this Prime Minister's swansong leaves much to be desired.

The Queen's Speech follows the Government's modus operandi of too much legislation rushed through—and therefore with too little scrutiny, and producing bad legislation. The programme suggests that the Government have stopped listening. It drips with sickly gesture politics. There are many comments about motherhood and apple pie that we can all agree with, but they are meaningless without the detailed plans to go with them. We have seen over eight rather disappointing years that this Government have had a good way with words and with soft soap, but have fallen down badly when it comes to delivering what they promised to the people.

Let me quote from the Queen's Speech:

"My Government will further reform the education system to improve quality and choice in the provision of schooling".

[Bob Spink]

I hope that that extends to our pupils with special educational needs. If it does, the Government must stop their closure of special schools, and especially the MLD—moderate learning difficulties—schools, which they are specifically targeting for closure. If the parents of those special children are to have choice and quality, those excellent and caring special schools must stay open. I was delighted that the Opposition spokesman on education, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), said last night in his winding-up speech that our party policy is still to have a moratorium on the closure of all those special schools. If the Government follow that course, they will certainly have our support.

The Queen's Speech goes on to say:

"My Government is committed to creating safe and secure communities, and fostering a culture of respect."

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I remind the hon. Gentleman that the part of the Queen's Speech that we are currently debating is the economy and welfare reform, on an amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

Bob Spink: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have the amendment that we are debating, and I shall stick to the issues that it deals with, such as the skills gap, the burden of regulation, public services improvement, the pensions crisis and encouraging saving. I am grateful for your advice.

I shall therefore quote another statement in the Queen's speech:

"My Government is committed to promoting efficiency, productivity and value for money."

We need to improve productivity; that is for sure. Improvement will come, however, through lower regulation. What will the Government do to remove the burden of red tape and bureaucracy on British business? What will they do to remove EU interference? Will they do what they did before: give us warm words and soft soap, and more of the same regulation and bureaucracy? Where are the plans to invest much more in our skills base and provide easier access to vocational training at all levels? How are the Government to promote better use of science and research in our economy, and encourage investment in productive plants? Workers need to work smarter, rather than harder and longer—although we need, of course, to work harder and longer as well.

There is great disappointment among pensioners that there seems to be little help for them in the Gracious Speech. The fact that they need help is not in question. Pensioners have received a poor deal from Governments of both colours over the past two or three decades, and things are getting worse not better. Under this Government, pensioners' share of national wealth has fallen since 1997, when the Prime Minister promised the earth, after which he has delivered very little sustainable improvement to pensioners.

The Queen's Speech tells us:

"My Government will begin long-term reform to provide sustainable income for those in retirement."

At those words, people in Canvey Island senior citizens association sang and danced in the aisles at CISCA house, but the Government's word then began to give way to the reality that there is little in the programme before us today to help hard-pressed pensioners, one in five of whom are currently living in poverty. Some 500,000 of them are living with nutritional problems because they cannot afford to buy the food that they need. That is a shame after eight years of a Labour Government.

There is nothing in the legislative programme to reverse the growth of means-testing, restore the earnings link and give a decent basic state pension. What will this programme do to improve private pensions, give more fairness and flexibility on the purchase of annuities and help fill pension funds by giving access to unclaimed assets held by the banks and financial institutions? What real incentives will be given to encourage people to save for their pensions over the next two or three decades? Pensions should have been the Government's key measure; instead, they were the people's key disappointment in this programme.

Having listened to your strictures, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall skip House of Lords reform and turn back to the economy. A leader in the *Financial Times* teased the Government and pilloried the Queen's Speech, calling for less Government interference in the economy and business, and less regulation. The Gracious Speech gave a commitment

"to streamline regulatory structures and make it simpler to remove outdated or unnecessary legislation".

Perversely, however, the programme, with its mass of legislation, will increase the burden of regulation and bureaucracy on UK business. We live in a global economy—Europe is an important part of our trading relationships, but so is the rest of the world. We must fight to retain the rebate that was won for us by Mrs. Thatcher in 1984, which is as relevant today as it was then. We must reverse much of the inappropriate control and regulation emanating from Europe, and we must hold an early referendum on the constitution, whatever the outcome in France.

Today, Parliament is less significant, less respected and less relevant to the people we represent. Democracy is damaged by an overbearing Government, who cram through bad or irrelevant legislation without scrutiny and ransack our constitution or sell out to Europe. People are disappointed by the dominance of political correctness over common sense under this Government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) said, Parliament must reassert its control of the Executive so that we can better serve those who sent us here.

That brings me to the electorate. In my first speech in the new Parliament, I wish to include a word of thanks to my constituents in Castle Point for returning me in such a handsome manner. Turnout increased significantly, and there was an 833 per cent. increase in my majority. Indeed, if replicated, the Castle Point result would have returned a Conservative Government, and thus led to a more tightly drawn, relevant and meaningful Queen's Speech.

6.7 pm

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): I congratulate hon. Members who have made their maiden speech today, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and the

hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Leech). I am grateful for this opportunity, and it is with pride and humility that I rise to make my maiden speech. My pride is in the faith that my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire has placed in me as its Member of Parliament, and my humility is rooted in that faith.

Due to the reorganisation of Scottish constituencies, I have the unique privilege to be the first in what I hope will be a long and impressive line of Members for Ochil and South Perthshire. Before progressing any further, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor. Before the election, most of my seat was part of the old Ochil constituency, which was represented by Martin O'Neill—soon to be Lord O'Neill. I am honoured to have known Martin for much of his time in Parliament, serving as his agent in 2001, and working closely with him on a number of local issues. Martin is a hard act to follow, as he served the people superbly. I do not intend any reference to our comparative sizes, but I fear that I may be in his shadow for some time.

Martin was first elected in 1979 as the Member for Stirlingshire, East and Clackmannan, with a majority of just 984, which is similar to my recent majority. In his final general election in 2001, his majority rose to 5,349, but I do not make any connection between that increase and my role as his agent. Martin is an insistent and passionate man, loved by many in the constituency. Much of his passion outside politics focuses on Hibernian football club, of which he is a director. I am sure that his passion was bruised following Saturday's result, but at least Hibs are still in the UEFA cup. As many hon. Members know, Martin's dedication to the club brought him into contact with another feisty Scot elected in 1979—the former Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, George Foulkes, who is the chairman of Heart of Midlothian football club. In opposition, Martin worked as a spokesman, first, on defence and disarmament, then on energy. In 1995 he became Chairman of the Trade and Industry Committee. I am sure that many hon. Members in the House want to extend to the future Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan their best wishes for his time in the other place.

The constituency that I humbly represent has seen its fair share of boundary reviews. The villages and towns, from Alloa in the south-west, to Crieff in the north and Kinross in the east, have fallen into 11 different constituencies since 1918. From examining the historical records for the area that I represent, I see that I am the first Labour Member of Parliament to represent Crieff, the area having been previously represented by Liberal, Liberal Unionist, Conservative and, lately, Scottish National party MPs, most recently Annabel Ewing. As her website informs us, Annabel Ewing is the daughter of SNP president Winnie Ewing and sister to Fergus Ewing MSP. I note, however, that the "Almanac of British Politics 2002" reminds us not to confuse the Scottish Ewing dynasty with that of J. R. Ewing from the 1980s television show "Dallas". Other distinguished representatives for the area have included former Secretary of State for Scotland Arthur Woodburn, Sir Nicholas Fairbairn, often remembered for his use of "unparliamentary language" and former Foreign Secretary and Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home.

In 1785, the first recorded cricket match in Scotland took place in Alloa. The actress Sophie Stewart was born in Crieff in 1908, and more recently, I spent my secondary education with former Partick Thistle, Liverpool, and Scotland footballer, and now "Match of the Day" pundit, Alan Hansen. Perhaps the most interesting claim that I have heard is that Pontius Pilate was born in Strathearn I am sure that my hon. Friends will appreciate, however, that that is not entirely possible to clarify, even with the substantial resources of the House of Commons Library.

My constituency is quite diverse, covering two local authority areas, Clackmannanshire and Perth and Kinross. Clackmannanshire is the smallest county in Scotland and my home for the last 37 years—an area of great beauty, with the Ochil hills, Alva Glen, Dollar Glen, Alloa, Sauchie, Clackmannan and Menstrie Towers, and Castle Campbell in Dollar. Over in Kinross lies Rachel House, the first children's hospice to be built in Scotland.

There is a great industrial past rooted in paper manufacture, textiles, woollen mills, mining, brick manufacture, and—lest we forget—brewing and distilling. Sadly, many of those traditional industries have disappeared, but fortunately we are left with a considerable whisky presence, including many world-famous Diageo brands and the former United Glass bottle manufacturers plant—quite a useful relationship, I am sure that the House would agree. Not only do we have the whisky and the bottles—and quite a number of consumers, I am sure—but the water to go with it in the form of Highland Spring from Blackford. At least we can now begin to see the sense of the boundary commission's work. We are also lucky to have leading technology companies such as Landcatch and E-Point adding to the diversity of the constituency.

Close to the centre of the constituency is the Gleneagles hotel, the location in just over 40 days of the G8 summit of world leaders. Much has been made of decisions to hold the summit at this location, and while I support the right to peaceful demonstrations, that should not be the expense of other local residents or the safety of all those present in the area, including demonstrators. I have great faith in the ability of our police force to carry out its job. Great work can be done at Gleneagles, with the opportunity for it to be the launch pad for the redevelopment of Africa and the associated alleviation of suffering.

Ochil and South Perthshire is diverse in both landscape and people, as I was reminded by Mr. Speaker on the occasion of my swearing in—and who am I to disagree? I am immensely proud to be a Labour Member of Parliament, especially as this Labour Government established a national minimum wage, which many Opposition Members could not find time to support. Now, under this Labour Government, Ochil and South Perthshire is growing and developing as a result of continued investment from Westminster and Holyrood.

A new acute hospital serving the Forth valley will be completed by 2009, a new community hospital in Sauchie by 2007, the reintroduction of rail services to Alloa by 2006 and a new road crossing over the Forth. There will, I hope, be three new secondary schools in Clackmannanshire, with a new school planned in

[Gordon Banks]

Kinross. South Perthshire has also benefited from new assistance for small businesses and investment in local infrastructure.

Before I was elected to this House I worked in the construction industry, and I now hope to put my experience to the test as we build a better future from these Benches. I am proud to see more than 4,000 successful new deal participants in the Ochil and Perth area, I am proud to see 20,000 local pensioners receiving the winter fuel allowance, and I am proud to see around 4,500 local pensioners benefit from pension credit. Those are the real numbers that show Ochil and South Perthshire is a better place to live under the Labour Government.

I have been asked on many occasions what my priorities are for Ochil and South Perthshire. I wish to help deliver greater equality and opportunity. I wish to see the constituency continue to prosper and grow, and I wish to see people living without fear, happy to be in an inclusive society.

Before resuming my seat, I hope to dig myself out of some trouble here today. My wife Lynda, of 24 fantastic years, and my children Victoria and Dominic, have been hugely supportive during the general election, but I must apologise for missing our wedding anniversary as a result of campaigning—honestly, the risks one takes to win an election! I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to address the House today in my maiden speech. I hope to catch your eye on future occasions—but perhaps not for so long.

6.15 pm

Mrs. Sharon Hodgson (Gateshead, East and Washington, West) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to rise to make my maiden speech and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Gordon Banks). I am grateful for this opportunity to make my first contribution to the debates of the House and, in particular, to speak about one of the strengths of my party, the strength of the British economy.

I am proud and privileged to represent the area where I was born and brought up, and where I intend to be a strong local voice for all my constituents, regardless of whom they voted for. I grew up in the 1980s in a one-parent family, surviving on benefits, until I went out to work to earn a living. I can tell you now, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it was not a good time to be poor. I cannot stand here today without paying tribute to my mam, to whom I owe so much. She struggled bravely for many years to bring up my brothers and me, and I know how proud she is of me today, being in this place.

In standing here today I must also speak of the strengths of my predecessor, Joyce Quin, who was MP for Gateshead, East from 1987 to 2001, when it became Gateshead, East and Washington, West. Before 1987 Joyce was the MEP for Tyne and Wear. She was the first Labour woman to represent any part of the north-east for 35 years, so I am proud to be one of now six to follow her in this place. Joyce will be recalled by many here as a staunch advocate of European integration and regional devolution. She served with great distinction on two high-profile Select Committees. She was an Opposition spokesperson, and when Labour came to power she served in the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. She is perhaps best known for her work as Minister for Europe in the late 1990s.

Joyce is known as fair-minded, sincere, calm, highly competent and, like so many from the north-east, friendly. As she represented the constituency where once lived Joseph Wilson Swan, the discoverer, along with Thomas Edison, of incandescent electric light, it is appropriate that Joyce became known over 18 years as a luminary, a bright and dynamic force for the north-east and for the people of Gateshead and Washington. She has always steeped herself in the history and culture of the north-east. As well as rightly campaigning for the return of the "Lindisfarne Gospels", Joyce plays the Northumbrian pipes and is a very knowledgeable city tour guide in Newcastle.

I know that it is a custom in speeches like this to be a bit of a tour guide also, and to rattle off a list of the landmarks in the constituency. However, I find myself in a difficult position because Gateshead, East and Washington, West is remarkable for the number of familiar landmarks which are in Gateshead and Washington but not actually in the constituency. For instance, Gateshead central library, Gateshead leisure centre, the Shipley art gallery and Gateshead college are all just outside my patch. The ancestral home of America's first president, Washington Village, is just outside my patch. Gateshead's Baltic arts centre, the Sage conference centre and the Gateshead Millennium bridge are all just outside my patch. The iconic Angel of the North is just outside my patch, but one can get a fantastic view of it if one stands in Chowdene, which I am proud to say is very much inside my patch.

Of course, we do have the famous Gateshead international stadium, put on the map by a great son of the north-east, Brendan Foster. We are proud of our three modern Metro stations, as well as the much older Bowes railway, designed by another great son of the north-east, George Stephenson. Opened in 1826, the Bowes is a proud relic of the industrial revolution, a colliery railway built to carry coal from the pits to the Tyne. The only working preserved standard-gauge rope-hauled railway in the world, it is in Springwell village—in my patch.

The House may have heard of the bloodthirstiest former resident of my constituency, long ago immortalised in one of the old songs of the north-east:

"Whisht! lads, haad yor gobs,
Aa'll tell yer aall and aaful story,
Whisht! lads, haad yor gobs,
An' Aal tell yer 'bout the wooorm."

The "aaful" Lambton worm—a monster that

"wad often feed
On calves an' lambs an' sheep,"

and sometimes even "swally bairns"—would not have lasted five minutes under a Labour Government pledged to tackle crime. In any case, I am pleased to say, it no longer lives in my patch.

Thankfully, these days what I have in my patch is a large number of hard-working people who have invested in a Labour Government. They have not been disappointed by the regeneration of the north-east in the years since 1997, although there is a lot more to do,

which will form part of my work here, as will doing my best to continue to tackle unemployment. Both Joyce Quin in 1987 and her predecessor Bernard Conlan in 1965 raised concerns about unemployment in their maiden speeches. Bernard Conlan said that the unemployment in his area was

"still somewhat higher than the national average."—[*Official Report*, 16 February 1965; Vol. 706, c. 1043.]

Twenty-three years later, Joyce Quin reflected sadly on her predecessor's speech and spoke of the

"tragedy that 23 years after he made that speech, unemployment in Gateshead, East is three times higher than it was then and that the hoped-for diversification"—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1987; Vol. 118, c. 441.]—

of the local industrial base had not taken place.

Today, the picture in Gateshead, East and Washington, West is very different. Unemployment is down by 50 per cent. and 2,330 people have got jobs as a result of the new deal since 1997. Over the past eight years, Labour has demonstrated that it is both possible and desirable to harness both social justice and economic prosperity, helping to ensure that we have a fair market, which is the servant of the people, not the other way around. I am a great believer in harnessing the power of the economy to help people in their jobs, in schools and hospitals and in their homes and communities. I know that the Labour Government are doing that. I also know that my job here is to represent families with children going through local schools, such as Kells Lane primary, St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic primary school and George Washington primary school. I will be a strong local voice in this place for people using hospitals such as the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Gateshead, as I did when I gave birth to my two children, Joseph and Emily. It is Labour's investment in the NHS that has given the Queen Elizabeth its new Jubilee wing. There are nearly 1,000 more doctors and 3,000 more nurses in the region. To me, revitalised public services with free and equal access are, and must always be, the social benefits of economic success.

As a former trade union official with Unison and a current GMB member, I am particularly keen to see the implementation of the Warwick agreement between the Labour Government and the trade unions. The trade union movement has 7 million members and is one of the biggest voluntary organisations in the country. Warwick is an enormous undertaking that will bring about enormous good in many spheres. Legislation on corporate manslaughter remains a pressing issue deserving bold action in the face of business hostility. Universal child care schemes would be a huge help for many in my constituency. The right for trade unions to bargain on pensions seems obvious, but it will not happen without the Labour Government, nor will the long-term solutions needed to protect and enhance pensions in future. Other issues arising from Warwick include tackling pay inequality, healthy eating in schools, putting cleanliness before cost in hospital cleaning and new help for manufacturing, and all need action in this Parliament.

At the end of this Parliament, we should be able to look back at the commitments made at Warwick and see all of them ticked off. By then, there will be new challenges to be faced with an economy that is strong and an agenda that is clear. We have a greater duty than ever to listen to the wisdom of working people and to their trade unions. I believe that that will make all of our patches brighter.

6.24 pm

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): I begin by congratulating all maiden speakers today on making excellent speeches. This place will be a better place for their presence. I have already marked a few of them for special services in future, though I will not tell them who they are.

Today, the Opposition parties remind me of Private Frazer in "Dad's Army", who always said, "We're doomed." It is hard to believe that we have done as well as the Government have. I came to this place in 2000, like the hon. Member for South Antrim (Dr. McCrea), in a by-election. I was fortunate enough, unlike the hon. Gentleman, to be returned in the 2001 election, and again in 2005, in my enhanced constituency.

The best way for me to say how the Labour Government have done is to say exactly what has happened in Glasgow. Back in the 1980s, unemployment in Glasgow was rife. In my constituency, it was running at well over 25 per cent. in some quarters. What do we have now? Unemployment is down by 37 per cent. There are now more than 1,100 young people in work. The number of those unemployed for one year or more is down by 64 per cent. Glasgow thrives on a competitive pool of highly trained flexible labour. More than 500,000 people are employed in the metropolitan travel-to-work area. The availability of a highly-skilled work force at competitive rates is due to the strength of the investments made in training and education to improve the skills of the work force. That has been done by a Labour Government.

We saw what happened to shipbuilding on the Clyde. Before or just after the 1997 election we were threatened with the closure of all shipbuilding yards in the Clyde. The industry was saved by my predecessor and by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. Shipbuilding is now thriving on the Clyde. There are orders that will keep the Clyde in shipbuilding until 2015. If we get more orders, shipbuilding will go on for much longer than that. I look to the Ministry of Defence to supply these orders.

Glasgow has a thriving business community. Most people who have been there recently will have taken a trip down the Clyde to see what has been built. The new Glasgow harbour project is in my constituency, across from the Govan shipyards. I do not know why anyone wants to buy a flat where a ship is being built opposite it, but the flats have been sold for quite a large amount of money. Obviously many people like to see ships being built.

That is a sign of what is happening in Glasgow. The infrastructure, the buildings and the retail sector are rated to be the second best in the United Kingdom. The only city that surpasses Glasgow is London. In my opinion, Glasgow is a great deal better than London because there is a city centre that has precincts that allow people to walk round all the shops. It is certainly seeing increased business.

[John Robertson]

The people of Glasgow are proud of their city. They always have been and they always will be. It is because of what has happened in the past eight years that Glasgow is now thriving.

We have introduced a Scottish Parliament, and we should be proud of that; it has helped the economy. I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the work that he has done, along with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, in sustaining progress in Scotland. However, we must consider the future. For example, we must examine pensions. We must sort out the issue. I say to the Opposition parties, as I have in the past, that they must come forward with no preconceived notions. If there is to be an all-party solution, we must all discuss the issues. Let us not bring party politics to the table, as the Opposition parties are doing every day.

The Opposition parties find reasons not to support anything. That is good, because we will win again at the next general election for the fourth time. Perhaps we shall even win a fifth term. They have not learned the lessons of the past eight years, but we have. We shall continue to represent the people. The core vote of Labour voters in Glasgow, Anniesland turned out in force in my new constituency. Labour Members in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom will work even harder to ensure that a Labour Government are returned at the next general election.

We will take on everybody, including the Liberals. We will expose them for what they are. They tell untruths all the time. They tell one part of a constituency one thing while telling another thing to another part of that constituency. We will ensure that they return to a party of 11 Members, as they were in the past. We will take on the Tories as well. The economy has been the No. 1 priority for the Government, and I am here to back them. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will continue to do the job that he has undertaken so far.

6.30 pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Con): Listening to the hon. Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) and his call for a national consensus on pensions should prove to anyone who had any residual doubts that the Government have already created a pensions crisis and are looking for allies to get themselves out of it.

In replying to the debate, I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) on his appointment as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He and I have returned to the Front Benches after something of an enforced absence—slightly longer in my case than in his. I noticed that almost his first statement after he was appointed was to emphasise that he had received an assurance from the Prime Minister that there were no no-go areas, and that he could explore any options for pension reform that he wished. I advise the right hon. Gentleman in the friendliest possible way not to take such assurances from the Prime Minister too literally. The Prime Minister has form on these matters. The House will recall that the first Minister with responsibility for welfare reform, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), was told by the Prime Minister to think the unthinkable. The right hon. Gentleman thought the unthinkable, and the unthinkable happened—he was sacked and was never returned to the Front Bench.

I am delighted to return to the House of Commons, representing an inner-city London constituency. I am well aware that some people think that Kensington and Chelsea is a very grand place. That was not always so. Well over 100 years ago, Queen Victoria insisted that the Albert hall and the Albert memorial could not be in the borough of Kensington and had to be in the borough of Westminster, where they have remained ever since. Her reasons were simple. She said it was unacceptable for Albert's memorial to be in the suburbs—so the constituency was seen at that time, if not more recently.

I have the pleasure of succeeding Michael Portillo, who not only was a distinguished representative of the constituency, but over a good number of years made an important contribution to the political life of the country. The country will be the poorer because of his decision to withdraw from political life, but I have no doubt that he will continue to contribute in a substantial way to the wider public affairs of the country.

Today we heard a superb Front-Bench speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) and some marvellous maiden speeches. It is somewhat impertinent of me in my current circumstances to congratulate maiden speakers. Those on the Government Benches face a difficult challenge over the weeks and months to come. Do they make their mark by supporting the Government, even when the Government are making a mess of things, or do they represent their constituents by showing their independence? Perhaps they ought to follow the wise advice of a former Member of the House, Kenneth Baker, who always advised Government Back Benchers to tread that narrow path between rebellion and sycophancy. It is a difficult path to pursue, but it is one that usually produces rewards.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends who made their maiden speeches earlier today. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mrs. Dorries) made a moving speech about the children in her constituency with special needs. I have no doubt that she will be a doughty champion for such interests over the years to come. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley), who will clearly be a champion of his local community. He already speaks with great authority on all matters affecting Northampton. My hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb) reminded not just his hon. Friends but hon. Members on the Government Benches that a social revolution was achieved by the right to buy for council tenants. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer tries to posture, as he did earlier today, as the champion of homeowners, he might like to remember that he and all his right hon. and hon. Friends passionately opposed tenants having the right to buy, and did so with all the power at their disposal. We always welcome a sinner that repenteth, but we are at liberty to remind him of his previous misdeeds.

The issue before the House today is welfare reform, and I am happy to concentrate my remarks on that theme. The Government raised in the Gracious Speech the issue of incapacity benefit, a benefit that was first introduced by the Conservative Government. When this

Government came to office, no less a person than the Prime Minister accused his predecessors of allowing a situation whereby more people claimed incapacity benefit than jobseeker's allowance. It is well worth considering this Government's achievements in that regard in the past eight years. What we find from the pre-Budget report published only last December is that today the number of incapacity benefit claimants is three times greater—a multiple of three—than the number claiming jobseeker's allowance. So, far from the Government having reversed—*[Interruption.]* No, I knew that the Government would respond in that way. They seem to be conveniently overlooking the fact that the Prime Minister's boast was that a million people on incapacity benefit were seeking work. We know that. The fact is that eight years later there are still a million people on incapacity benefit seeking work. Despite what the Gracious Speech says, the Government have not even offered a Bill; they have offered a Green Paper that will at some time lead to a Bill, which will not come into effect until 2008, three years from now, and will affect only new claimants. So nothing is offered to the million people currently on incapacity benefit, whom the Government themselves say wish to work and are entitled to find work.

If incapacity benefit has been a matter of some deep disappointment, on pensions there really is a crisis. When my hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor correctly reminded the House of the words of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), he did so not just to make a point. The right hon. Gentleman said that this Labour Government inherited a country with one of the strongest pension systems in Europe, and now eight years later we have one of the weakest. The fact that that came from no less a person than the right hon. Gentleman shows that that is not a partisan point. He is a loyal member of his party. He actually tried to do something on this matter for the Government, and his judgment and that of the outside world is that the Government have manifestly failed in this area.

It is not just a question of the demographic changes that the Adair Turner report is looking at; what the Government cannot refuse to acknowledge, and what the Chancellor in particular must accept, is that the Government are to a significant extent the authors of the crisis. This is a crisis of their making. The Chancellor's decision in the first months of his tenure to take £5 billion a year from the pension funds was a disgraceful decision, and of course it was not a one-off decision. The figure of £5 billion is used, but it is £5 billion a year, continuing as we speak. Therefore, some £30 billion to £40 billion, which would have been available for those receiving pensions, is no longer available.

During the last few years I have served as a non-executive for a company dealing with fund management and I have seen the consequences of the Government's policy. They cannot deny those consequences. This crisis affects not just those with private occupational pensions, but those with local authority pension funds. All the local authority pension funds have lost out in exactly the same way, and public sector workers are suffering in exactly the same way as those in the private sector.

The Chancellor is also responsible for the collapse of confidence in saving. The proportion of household income that was regularly saved when the Government took office, when the Chancellor took up his responsibilities, was 11 per cent. That has now collapsed to almost half that figure, to 6 per cent., with no sign of it going up again. That is because the Chancellor, more than any other individual, has been responsible for the destruction of the public's confidence in saving, and he must accept responsibility for that.

What are the Government doing to deal with the matter? We are told that there is a common desire to see savings increase. I have no doubt that that is what the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions wants, but there is already evidence of a desire on his part to use compulsion, rather than incentive, to deal with this matter. Indeed, he has said as much, and I can share a couple of the relevant quotations with him if he chooses to challenge the point that I am making.

If the Secretary of State is looking for national consensus on this matter, he will not get it if he chooses the route of compulsion. Compulsion is wrong in principle. Once taxpayers have paid their lawful taxes, it is not for the state to order them as to what their priorities should be with the remainder of their income. The Secretary of State must acknowledge the fact that if he wishes to get broad support for an approach to pensions, he cannot go down this route because it will not work.

This approach is not only wrong in principle; as Sir Digby Jones of the CBI has said, it is another form of taxation. As he also said, to compel people to save is in fact to create another stealth tax, and Government Front Benchers must recognise that fact. Moreover, such an approach is also grossly unfair to those who have saved under the existing incentives. If the Government make saving compulsory, the first thing that the Chancellor will do is to remove the existing incentives. There will be no need for incentives if people have no choice. All those who have planned responsibly for their future retirement, based on an assumption that incentives will continue, will find them swept away.

Finally—*[Interruption.]* This is not an amusing point; the Chancellor should not smile and I will tell him why. He said that he takes great pride in the pension credit. As a result of introducing means-testing, if those in receipt of pension credit are forced to make further provision through private or occupational pension schemes, they stand to lose between 40 and 100 per cent. of their pension credit. So there are real and serious problems, and the Chancellor and his colleagues must recognise that fact.

The introduction of compulsion will be a matter of great controversy, but we have also seen total confusion among Cabinet Ministers as to the pace of pension reform. Reference has been made to the hon. Member for Normanton (Ed Balls), who said in a press conference—he was no doubt speaking with all the Chancellor's authority—that no pension reform could be implemented for many years to come, and until after the next general election. However, as soon as the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was appointed, he said that the hon. Member for

[Sir Malcolm Rifkind]

Normanton was speaking not as a Government spokesman but merely as a candidate. On this occasion, the Chancellor immediately jumped to the rescue of his old ally. He was quoted in the *Financial Times* as making it clear that such reform would indeed take many years, and that there would indeed have to be another election before pension reforms were introduced.

If there is this confusion between the Chancellor and the Secretary of State—and doubtless among other Ministers as well—I make an offer to the Secretary of State. *[Interruption.]* I am very generous and I want to make him an offer. If he wants national consensus on pensions, the first step that he should take to prove it is to achieve consensus within the Cabinet. Once the Cabinet is united, speaks with a single voice and we know exactly what is being proposed, we will be more impressed by pious rhetoric about the need for national consensus.

Let me put another point to the Secretary of State and the Chancellor. The Prime Minister said in February that he was proud of what had been achieved on pensions. Is he really proud of taking £5 billion a year from pension funds, of a collapsed savings ratio, and of those on pension credit having to be means-tested? Is that his idea of something to be proud of? The Chancellor aspires to replace the Prime Minister. I do not know what his prime ministerial qualities are, but he does remind me of a general whom I knew in the Ministry of Defence. It was said of that general that "This man has great leadership qualities. His men will follow him anywhere—even if it is only out of curiosity."

The Labour party and the country as a whole are indeed curious about the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Today, he tried to bludgeon his way through all the various arguments that have demolished the weakening economy that he presides over. He is as anxious as ever to replace his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. This country will judge the Government's record on pensions and on welfare by the fact that, according to the views of Labour spokesmen themselves, we have seen this country's strong pensions system turn into one of the weakest in Europe. For that reason, I have no hesitation in inviting my hon. Friends not only to see the Queen's Speech as a tired speech from an increasingly tired Government, but to reject the confusion in the Government's own ranks by voting against the Government and for the amendment.

6.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. David Blunkett): I welcome back to the House of Commons the shadow Secretary of State, who is experienced, thoughtful and mature—just the sort of individual to be rejected as the leader of the Tory party. When a maiden reaches the altar for the second time, the first betrothal must be annulled, but the present Opposition have no values, no policies and no principles, so the annulment will be difficult. As we have seen this afternoon, he has not yet reached a consensus in his own mind, never mind within the shadow Cabinet. On the other hand, his constituency has a fine tradition—the much lamented Alan Clark, the still lamenting Michael Portillo and the flower show—which provides an interesting background for him to address some of the serious issues around welfare reform, pensions and employment with which we will be dealing in the coming months.

The Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), declared that he has an open mind. He presumably has an open cheque book, too, and he uses invisible ink that changes his writing depending on which part of the country, borough or city he is in. I think he said that he would apply local income tax at a flat rate across the country, which means that it would not be a local income tax. *[Interruption.]* Oh; it will be a flat tax at a variable rate with a variable contribution from the Treasury to wipe out the inevitable variations. At least it will provide us with some entertainment over the years to come.

Before I mention my hon. Friends who have made their maiden speeches, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) on his gracious and thoughtful speech. He was a great friend; he showed me great kindness on occasions when I needed it; and I will miss his presence in the Cabinet. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his work in Northern Ireland.

I congratulate all new Members, and my hon. Friends in particular, on their maiden speeches, including my hon. Friends the Members for Normanton (Ed Balls) and for Wolverhampton, South-East (Mr. McFadden). When No. 10 and No. 11 work together, we are invincible, and I am sure that when former occupants of No. 10 and No. 11 work together, we will be equally invincible on the Back Benches. [*Laughter.*] It is absolutely true.

My hon. Friends the Members for Worsley (Ms Keeley), for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson), for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck), for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for Ochil and South Perthshire (Gordon Banks) and for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Mrs. Hodgson) all made excellent speeches. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon, because I visited his constituency and his majority was undoubtedly enhanced enormously by my visit, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, who mentioned David Hinchliffe, who is a long-standing friend of mine and who did a tremendous job as the Member of Parliament for that constituency.

I also want to mention the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley (Ms Keeley), who reflected on the importance of our welfare-to-work policies and the contribution that they can make.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned bluebells, on which I commented in a poem during the general election. I want to assure her that my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will ensure that global warming does not wipe out the bluebells, although we have every intention of pushing back the blue tide that emerged halfway up the beach and then receded again on 5 May.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer referred to the tremendous strides that we have made over eight years. When I was Secretary of State for Education and Employment, I was involved in the way in which employability and employment policies were implemented in the first four years, and had the privilege

of working with my right hon. Friend on establishing the new deal programme, through which more than 1 million people passed into work, more than 0.5 million of whom were young people over the age of 25. I am proud that 75 per cent. of the working age population now have a job and that more than 2 million extra people are now offered the opportunity of working for themselves, building dignity and self-respect.

I have seen the pension credit come into force, with more than 2 million people in retirement receiving the income guarantee and 2.7 million receiving the pension credit. The rise from £69 to £109 is unprecedented in overcoming pensioner poverty, and it is absolutely crucial that we build on that in the years to come. Let us refute immediately the idea that the changes in advance corporation tax, and with it the dividend credit, first, started under us, and secondly, were responsible for damaging equity-based pension programmes. After all, it was Norman Lamont in 1993 who first started to reduce advance corporation tax, and with it the dividend credit, saying that it was unworkable and was damaging the way in which people made choices about their investments, including into research, and involved the danger of pushing jobs overseas. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor continued that logic, and reduced ACT by 3p, and by 4p for small businesses. The equity markets were then sustained until the world capital markets collapsed, with £250 billion wiped off the stock exchange. The resulting impact on personal and equity pensions is known to all of us. Adair Turner has said that we lived in a fool's paradise—that people's reliance on the equity markets from the 1980s meant that they misled themselves about the sustainability of pensions in view of the failure to understand the impact of people living longer, on the one hand, and working less, on the other.

The fact is that people were not prepared to face up to the challenge of the future, and we are. We are prepared to offer a consensus to the Opposition parties, because people will not forgive any politician who does not look 30, 40 and 50 years ahead and come up with solutions for the future. It is a challenge for the nation, not just for political parties. It is a challenge for individuals to build in retirement an income that will sustain and support them with dignity and comfort; a challenge to business to ensure that it is prepared to join us in making that contribution; and a challenge to all of us to determine who pays, how they pay, at what point they are entitled, and what that entitlement will bring. Until we face the challenge of people living longer and wanting to work less and retire earlier, and people believing that they will enter the labour market at a later age, we will be in a fool's paradise.

The whole programme that we put before the nation, were elected on and are asking the House to affirm tonight was based certain key objectives. They included making the welfare state a ladder or escalator out of poverty instead of a safety net. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made tremendous strides, through tax credits, on lifting children out of poverty, and on ensuring that, through our welfare-to-work policies, people can work themselves out of poverty and that they have dignity and self-respect in employment, and that our welfare-to-work policies for those who are incapacitated or sick mean that those who are not prepared to write themselves off will not be written off by us. They can thus earn for themselves and the future.

Our aim of having 80 per cent. of the working-age population in work will not only sustain services and generate the productivity that our economy needs to invest in them, but obviously help to sustain us in retirement through the income that we need for an acceptable pension.

Above all, we must link the welfare-to-work, pension and employment policies so that the nation supports those who are prepared to support themselves and helps those who, because of past failures, need our support in caring and retirement.

We must also recognise the change that has taken place in the past 50 years in the make-up of our social and economic structure. A fivefold increase in divorce has changed not only the income of the households responsible but also their housing requirements. That is why £12.3 billion currently goes into housing benefit and £12.7 billion goes into incapacity benefit, including the attendant variable and passported rates that go to those income support benefit recipients. It is why, in the past, so much money went towards supporting people in unemployment. However, in the past eight years, billions of pounds have been translated from propping people up in idleness into ensuring that they can look after themselves and contribute to our economy.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for his vision in raising the windfall levy, investing in the new deal and translating investment in idleness in the welfare state into productivity, growth and an economy that works better than any economy in the western world. That is why Labour Members are determined to continue with the reform agenda, which threatens nobody but provides the extra support for which my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) asked this afternoon for those who need long-term care and cannot work for themselves.

However, the agenda demands responsibility, matched by rights, from every individual so that all Members of Parliament can go to their constituencies and offer the prospect of an enabling Government, who have developed the child trust fund, Sure Start and allowed us to look to the long term in building assets for those who previously had nothing. Equality in this country has been transformed so that those who had little will now have the opportunity of working and developing as a result of the minimum wage and the tax credit system, and having work that is worth while and can bring prosperity to them and their families. With that come the responsibilities of a something for something society.

It is important to spell out again tonight that the Government's role is not to prop up the welfare state but use it to liberate people to tackle matters for themselves. We value the skills agenda that the National Employment Panel is developing to ensure that people have the prospect of looking after themselves and their families in future. The Government enable them to do that. The vote this evening is about whether we go forward to the future or back to the miserable world of 3 million unemployed, and the benefit-dependant society, where tax was used to prop up the welfare state

[Mr. David Blunkett]

rather than eliminating people's need to rely on it. We should reject the amendments and vote for a programme for the future.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 241, Noes 335.

Division No. 2] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Alan
Bellingham, Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Brian
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Jeremy
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Bruce, Malcolm
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, David
Campbell, Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Alistair
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clegg, Nick
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward
Davies, Quentin
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias
Evennett, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mark
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Paul
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mike
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Horwood, Martin
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald
Howarth, David
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Jeremy
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Jones, David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leech, John
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
Maude, rh Francis
McCrea, Rev. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Andrew
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Brooks
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Prisk, Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Adrian
Scott, Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Charles
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williams, Mark
Willis, Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Tim
Young, rh George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and Gregory Barker

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Roger

Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blair, rh Tony
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell
Brown, rh Gordon
Brown, rh Nicholas
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Stephen
Byrne, Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, Alan
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clelland, David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, David
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Sian
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacNeil, Angus
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Ms Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Meacher, rh Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, rh John
Price, Adam
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robertson, Angus
Robinson, Geoffrey
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dari
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Gareth
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, Dave
Weir, Mike
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Wills, Michael

Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wright, David
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Joan Ryan and
Kevin Brennan

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed, at the end of the Question, to add:

"but regret that the Gracious Speech contains no commitment to introduce legislation to reform the voting system and ensure that the composition of this House reflects the wishes of the electorate; further regret that the Gracious Speech proposes the introduction of a costly and ineffective system of compulsory identity cards instead of providing for more police on the street; further regret the absence of proposals to introduce a fair system of local income tax, related to the individual's ability to pay; deplore the absence of measures to ensure that the elderly receive free long term care; further regret the absence of proposals to end the complex means tested pensions system, which has deterred saving, has left many pensioners in poverty, and disproportionately disadvantages women; further regret the absence of legislation to reverse the punitive system of tuition fees and top up fees that mean students could begin their careers with mortgage level debts by 2010; further deplore the absence of specific measures to tackle the serious threat from climate change; and are concerned that there is still no commitment to introduce legislation to clarify the responsibility of the Prime Minister to Parliament, particularly in relation to the prerogative powers and the role of Parliament in matters of war and peace." *—[Mr. Stunell]*

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 33 (Calling of amendments at end of debate), That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 67, Noes 327.

Division No. 3] **[7.15 pm**

AYES

Alexander, Danny
Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Alan
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Jeremy
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Alistair
Clegg, Nick
Davey, Edward
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Foster, Don
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David
Hemming, John
Holmes, Paul
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles
Kramer, Susan
Lamb, Norman
Laws, David
Leech, John
Llwyd, Elfyn
MacNeil, Angus
Moore, Michael
Mulholland, Greg
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr. John
Reid, Alan
Robertson, Angus
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert
Stunell, Andrew
Swinson, Jo
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mike
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Willis, Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Richard Younger-Ross and
Bob Russell

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blair, rh Tony
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell
Brown, rh Gordon
Brown, rh Nicholas
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Stephen
Byrne, Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, Gregory
Campbell, Alan
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Dodds, Nigel
Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, David
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug

Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Sian
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Ms Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Ian
McCrea, Rev. William
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Jamie
Reid, rh. John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Geoffrey
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela, *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dari
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wright, David
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Joan Ryan and
Kevin Brennan

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 322, Noes 246.

Division No. 4] **[7.29 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell
Brown, rh Gordon
Brown, rh Nicholas
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Stephen
Byrne, Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, Alan
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh John
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Brian H.
Doran, Frank

Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Patrick
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, David
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Stan
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Ms Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Meacher, rh Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Jamie
Reid, rh. John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Geoffrey
Rooney, Terry
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela, *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dari
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Robert N.
Watts, Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wright, David
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Joan Ryan and
Kevin Brennan

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter
Bacon, Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Alan
Bellingham, Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bercow, John
Binley, Brian
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Jeremy
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, David
Campbell, Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Alistair
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clegg, Nick
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Curry, rh David
Davey, Edward
Davies, Quentin
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Dodds, Nigel

Donaldson, Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias
Evennett, David
Fallon, Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mark
Forth, rh Eric
Foster, Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Paul
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mike
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, John
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, Gerald
Howarth, David
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Jeremy
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Jones, David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, rh Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, John
Lansley, Andrew
Laws, David
Leech, John
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lidington, David
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Angus
Main, Anne
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
Maude, rh Francis
McCrea, Rev. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Andrew
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Brooks
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Reid, Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Scott, Lee
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian
Taylor, Matthew
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Charles
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mike
Whittingdale, John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Willis, Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Wright, [illegible]my
Yeo, Tim
Young, rh George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Andrew Selous and
Michael Fabricant

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

To be presented by Privy Councillors or Members of Her Majesty's Household.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, proceedings relating to Ways and Means in the name of Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

Question agreed to.

WAYS AND MEANS

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Resolved,

(1) That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance.

(2) This Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for any relief, other than a relief that—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.—*[Dawn Primarolo.]*

MR. SPEAKER *then, pursuant to Standing Order No. 51(3) (Ways and Means Motions), put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the further motions.*

2. VALUE ADDED TAX (GOODS SUBJECT TO WAREHOUSING REGIME)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for the purposes of value added tax in connection with goods subject to a warehousing regime.

3. VALUE ADDED TAX (FUEL FOR PRIVATE USE)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for and in connection with amending section 57 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994.

4. VALUE ADDED TAX (OVERSTATED OR OVERPAID AMOUNTS)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Section 80 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 shall be amended as follows.

(2) For subsection (1) there shall be substituted—

"(1) Where a person—

(a) has accounted to the Commissioners for VAT for a prescribed accounting period (whenever ended), and

(b) in doing so, has brought into account as output tax an amount that was not output tax due,

the Commissioners shall be liable to credit the person with that amount.

(1A) Where the Commissioners—

(a) have assessed a person to VAT for a prescribed accounting period (whenever ended), and

(b) in doing so, have brought into account as output tax an amount that was not output tax due,

they shall be liable to credit the person with that amount.

(1B) Where a person has for a prescribed accounting period (whenever ended) paid to the Commissioners an amount by way of VAT that was not VAT due to them, otherwise than as a result of—

(a) an amount that was not output tax due being brought into account as output tax, or

(b) an amount of input tax allowable under section 26 not being brought into account,

the Commissioners shall be liable to repay to that person the amount so paid.".

(3) In subsection (2) before "repay" there shall be inserted "credit or".

(4) After subsection (2) there shall be inserted—

"(2A) Where—

(a) as a result of a claim under this section by virtue of subsection (1) or (1A) above an amount falls to be credited to a person, and

(b) after setting any sums against it under or by virtue of this Act, some or all of that amount remains to his credit,

the Commissioners shall be liable to pay (or repay) to him so much of that amount as so remains.".

(5) In subsection (3) for "under this section, that repayment" there shall be substituted "under this section by virtue of subsection (1) or (1A) above, that the crediting".

(6) For subsection (3A) there shall be substituted—

"(3A) Subsection (3B) below applies for the purposes of subsection (3) above where—

(a) an amount would (apart from subsection (3) above) fall to be credited under subsection (1) or (1A) above to any person ("the taxpayer"), and

(b) the whole or a part of the amount brought into account as mentioned in paragraph (b) of that subsection has, for practical purposes, been borne by a person other than the taxpayer.".

(7) In subsection (3B), in paragraph (a), for "repayment" there shall be substituted "crediting".

(8) For subsection (4) there shall be substituted—

"(4) The Commissioners shall not be liable on a claim under this section—

(a) to credit an amount to a person under subsection (1) or (1A) above, or

(b) to repay an amount to a person under subsection (1B) above,

if the claim is made more than 3 years after the relevant date.

(4ZA) The relevant date is—

(a) in the case of a claim by virtue of subsection (1) above, the end of the prescribed accounting period mentioned in that subsection, unless paragraph (b) below applies;

(b) in the case of a claim by virtue of subsection (1) above in respect of an erroneous voluntary disclosure, the end of the prescribed accounting period in which the disclosure was made;

(c) in the case of a claim by virtue of subsection (1A) above in respect of an assessment issued on the basis of an erroneous voluntary disclosure, the end of the prescribed accounting period in which the disclosure was made;

(d) in the case of a claim by virtue of subsection (1A) above in any other case, the end of the prescribed accounting period in which the assessment was made;

(e) in the case of a claim by virtue of subsection (1B) above, the date on which the payment was made.

In the case of a person who has ceased to be registered under this Act, any reference in paragraphs (b) to (d) above to a prescribed accounting period includes a reference to a period that would have been a prescribed accounting period had the person continued to be registered under this Act.

(4ZB) For the purposes of this section the cases where there is an erroneous voluntary disclosure are those cases where—

(a) a person discloses to the Commissioners that he has not brought into account for a prescribed accounting period (whenever ended) an amount of output tax due for the period;

(b) the disclosure is made in a later prescribed accounting period (whenever ended); and

(c) some or all of the amount is not output tax due.".

(9) For subsections (4A) and (4B) there shall be substituted—

"(4A) Where—

(a) an amount has been credited under subsection (1) or (1A) above to any person at any time on or after 26th May 2005, and

(b) the amount so credited exceeded the amount which the Commissioners were liable at that time to credit to that person,

the Commissioners may, to the best of their judgement, assess the excess credited to that person and notify it to him.".

(10) For subsection (7) there shall be substituted—

"(7) Except as provided by this section, the Commissioners shall not be liable to credit or repay any amount accounted for or paid to them by way of VAT that was not VAT due to them.".

(11) The side note to the section shall accordingly become "Credit for, or repayment of, overstated or overpaid VAT".

(12) In consequence of those amendments the Value Added Tax Act 1994 shall be amended as follows.

(13) In section 83, in subsection (1)(a) for "and which they are in consequence liable to repay to him" there shall be substituted "and, as a result, they are liable under section 80(2A) to pay (or repay) an amount to him,".

(14) In section 80A—

(a) in subsection (2)(a), for "repayment" there shall be substituted "crediting";

(b) in subsection (2)(b), for "the cost of the original payment of that amount to the Commissioners" there shall be substituted "the amount brought into account as mentioned in paragraph (b) of subsection (1) or (1A) of that section";

(c) in subsection (3)(a), for "repayment" there shall be substituted "crediting of the amount";

(d) for subsection (3)(b) there shall be substituted—

"(b) provision for cases where an amount is credited but an equal amount is not reimbursed in accordance with the arrangements;";

(e) in subsection (3)(c), for "repaid" there shall be substituted "paid (or repaid)";

(f) in subsection (4)(a), for "to make the repayments to the Commissioners that they are required to make" there shall be substituted "to make the repayments, or give the notifications, to the Commissioners that they are required to make or give";

(g) in subsection (7)—

(i) for "repayment", in the first place, there shall be substituted "credit";

(ii) for "the making of any repayment" there shall be substituted "the crediting of any amount".

(15) In section 80B after subsection (1) there shall be inserted—

"(1A) Where—

(a) an amount ("the gross credit") has been credited to any person under subsection (1) or (1A) of section 80,

(b) any sums were set against that amount, in accordance with subsection (2A) of that section, and

(c) the amount reimbursed in accordance with the reimbursement arrangements was less than the gross credit,

subsection (1B) below applies.

(1B) In any such case—

(a) the person shall cease to be entitled to so much of the gross credit as exceeds the amount so reimbursed, and

(b) the Commissioners may, to the best of their judgement, assess the amount due from that person and notify it to him,

but an amount shall not be assessed under this subsection to the extent that the person is liable to pay it to the Commissioners as mentioned in subsection (1) above.

(1C) In determining the amount that a person is liable to pay as mentioned in subsection (1) above, any amount reimbursed in accordance with the reimbursement arrangements shall be regarded as first reducing so far as possible the amount that he would have been liable so to pay, but for the reimbursement of that amount.

(1D) For the purposes of this section, nil is an amount.

(1E) Any reference in any other provision of this Act to an assessment under subsection (1) above includes, if the context so admits, a reference to an assessment under subsection (1B) above.".

(16) In section 83—

(a) in paragraph (t), before "repayment" there shall be inserted "crediting or";

(b) in paragraph (ta), after "80B(1)" there shall be inserted "or (1B)".

(17) The amendments made by this Resolution shall have effect in any case where a claim under section 80(2) of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 is made on or after 26th May 2005, whenever the event occurred in respect of which the claim is made.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

5. VALUE ADDED TAX (GAS AND ELECTRICITY SUPPLIED BY PERSONS OUTSIDE UK)

Resolved,

That—

(1) In paragraph 8 of Schedule 6 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994—

(a) after "8" there shall be inserted ", or any supply of goods is treated by virtue of section 9A,", and

(b) after "the services" there shall be inserted "or goods".

(2) This Resolution shall have effect in relation to supplies made on or after 17th March 2005.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

6. DONATIONS TO CHARITY BY INDIVIDUALS

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending section 25 of the Finance Act 1990.

7. EMPLOYEE SECURITIES

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made in relation to securities acquired pursuant to a right or opportunity available by reason of employment.

8. SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending sections 82B and 508 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 and section 88 of the Income Tax (Trading and Other Income) Act 2005.

9. UNIT TRUSTS AND OPEN-ENDED INVESTMENT COMPANIES

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the taxation of unit holders in authorised unit trust schemes and shareholders in open-ended investment companies.

10. CORPORATION TAX (COUNTERACTING TAX ARBITRAGE)

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made for the purposes of corporation tax about—

(a) amounts that are not to be allowed as deductions for the purposes of the Corporation Tax Acts; and

(b) contributions to the capital of any company that are to be treated as income arising to the company.

11. CHARGEABLE GAINS

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending, or making amendments connected with, the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992.

12. ACCOUNTING PRACTICE

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made with respect to matters connected with accounting practice.

13. CHARGES ON INCOME

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made in relation to charges on income for the purposes of corporation tax.

14. RENT FACTORING

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made—

(a) amending any enactment contained in sections 43A to 43G of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988, or

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(b) in relation to finance agreements (whenever entered into) to which section 43D of that Act would apply but for section 43E(1)(a) or (b) of it.

15. Loan relationships etc

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made for the purposes of corporation tax in relation to—

(a) loan relationships, and

(b) other relationships where a company stands, or is to be treated as standing, in the position of a creditor or debtor in relation to a debt.

16. Annuities and other annual payments

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made in relation to assets which—

(a) represent the right to, or

(b) secure,

the payment of, or payments corresponding to, the whole or a part of one or more payments remaining to be made under an annuity or other obligation to make annual payments.

17. Manufactured interest

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending paragraph 3 of Schedule 23A to the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

18. Strips of interest-bearing corporate securities

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made in relation to assets which—

(a) represent the right to, or

(b) secure,

the payment of, or payments corresponding to, the whole or a part of one or more payments remaining to be made under a security.

19. Derivative contracts etc

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made for the purposes of corporation tax in relation to—

(a) derivative contracts, and

(b) contracts and other transactions which are to be treated as if they were derivative contracts.

20. Capital redemption policies

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made in relation to capital redemption policies, within the meaning of Chapter 2 of Part 13 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

21. Provision not at arm's length

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending Schedule 28AA to the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

22. Intangible fixed assets

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending Schedule 29 to the Finance Act 2002 and section 86(2) of the Finance Act 1993.

23. Insurance companies etc

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about insurance companies and friendly societies.

24. Controlled foreign companies

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending Chapter 4 of Part 17 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

25. The United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made in relation to the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority.

26. Stamp duty land tax

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003.

27. Stamp duty land tax (miscellaneous amendments)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003 shall be amended in accordance with the following provisions of this Resolution.

(2) In section 45, at the end of subsection (3) there shall be inserted "except in a case where the secondary contract gives rise to a transaction that is exempt from charge by virtue of subsection (3) of section 73 (alternative property finance: land sold to financial institution and re-sold to individual)".

(3) In paragraph 1 of Schedule 7, in sub-paragraph (7) for "paragraph 3" there shall be substituted "paragraphs 3 and 4A".

(4) In paragraph 3 of Schedule 7—

(a) for sub-paragraph (2) there shall be substituted—

"(2) The amount chargeable is the tax that would have been chargeable in respect of the relevant transaction but for group relief if the chargeable consideration for that transaction had been an amount equal to—

(a) the market value of the subject-matter of the transaction, and

(b) if the acquisition was the grant of a lease at a rent, that rent,

or, as the case may be, an appropriate proportion of the tax that would have been so chargeable.", and

(b) at the end of sub-paragraph (5) there shall be inserted "and paragraph 4A (withdrawal of group relief in certain cases involving successive transactions)".

(5) In paragraph 4 of Schedule 7—

(a) in sub-paragraph (3), for paragraph (b) there shall be substituted—

"(b) another company that—

(i) is above the vendor in the group structure, and

(ii) as a result of the transaction ceases to be a member of the same group as the purchaser.", and

(b) in sub-paragraph (5), for "this purpose" there shall be substituted "the purposes of sub-paragraphs (3) and (4)".

(6) After paragraph 4 of Schedule 7 there shall be inserted—

"Withdrawal of group relief in certain cases involving successive transactions

4A(1) Where, in the case of a transaction ("the relevant transaction") that is exempt from charge by virtue of paragraph 1 (group relief)—

(a) there is a change in the control of the purchaser,

(b) that change occurs—

(i) before the end of the period of three years beginning with the effective date of the relevant transaction, or

(ii) in pursuance of, or in connection with, arrangements made before the end of that period,

(c) apart from this paragraph, group relief in relation to the relevant transaction would not be withdrawn under paragraph 3, and

(d) any previous transaction falls within sub-paragraph (2),

paragraphs 3 and 4 have effect in relation to the relevant transaction as if the vendor in relation to the earliest previous transaction falling within sub-paragraph (2) were the vendor in relation to the relevant transaction.

(2) A previous transaction falls within this sub-paragraph if—

(a) the previous transaction is exempt from charge by virtue of paragraph 1, 7 or 8,

(b) the effective date of the previous transaction is less than three years before the date of the event falling within sub-paragraph (1)(a),

(c) the chargeable interest acquired under the relevant transaction by the purchaser in relation to that transaction is the same as, comprises, forms part of, or is derived from, the chargeable interest acquired under the previous transaction by the purchaser in relation to the previous transaction, and

(d) since the previous transaction, the chargeable interest acquired under that transaction has not been acquired by any person under a transaction that is not exempt from charge by virtue of paragraph 1, 7 or 8.

(3) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (1)(a) there is a change in the control of a company if—

(a) any person who controls the company (alone or with others) ceases to do so,

(b) a person obtains control of the company (alone or with others), or

(c) the company is wound up.

References to "control" in this sub-paragraph shall be construed in accordance with section 416 of the Taxes Act 1988.

(4) If two or more transactions effected at the same time are the earliest previous transactions falling within sub-paragraph (2), the reference in sub-paragraph (1) to the vendor in relation to the earliest previous transaction is a reference to the persons who are the vendors in relation to the earliest previous transactions.

(5) In this paragraph "arrangements" includes any scheme, agreement or understanding, whether or not legally enforceable."

(7) In paragraph 11(5)(a) of Schedule 17A, for the words from "the purchaser" to the end there shall be substituted "the event falling within paragraph 3(1)(a) of Schedule 7 (purchaser ceasing to be a member of the same group as the vendor), as read with paragraph 4A of that Schedule".

(8) In paragraph 8 of Schedule 7—

(a) in sub-paragraph (1)(b) for "the first and second conditions" there shall be substituted "all the conditions", and

(b) after sub-paragraph (5) there shall be inserted—

"(5A) The third condition is that the undertaking or part acquired by the acquiring company has as its main activity the carrying on of a trade that does not consist wholly or mainly of dealing in chargeable interests.

In this sub-paragraph "trade" has the same meaning as in the Taxes Act 1988."

(9) In paragraph 9 of Schedule 7, for sub-paragraph (2) there shall be substituted—

"(2) The amount chargeable is the tax that would have been chargeable in respect of the relevant transaction but for reconstruction or acquisition relief if the chargeable consideration for that transaction had been an amount equal to—

(a) the market value of the subject-matter of the transaction, and

(b) if the acquisition was the grant of a lease at a rent, that rent,

or, as the case may be, an appropriate proportion of the tax that would have been so chargeable."

(10) After paragraph 17 of Schedule 15 there shall be inserted—

"*Withdrawal of money etc from partnership after transfer of chargeable interest*

17A(1) This paragraph applies where—

(a) there is a transfer of a chargeable interest to a partnership ("the land transfer");

(b) the land transfer falls within paragraph (a), (b) or (c) of paragraph 10(1);

(c) during the period of three years beginning with the date of the land transfer, a qualifying event occurs.

(2) A qualifying event is—

(a) a withdrawal from the partnership of money or money's worth which does not represent income profit by the relevant person—

(i) withdrawing capital from his capital account,

(ii) reducing his interest, or

(iii) ceasing to be a partner, or

(b) in a case where the relevant person has made a loan to the partnership—

(i) the repayment (to any extent) by the partnership of the loan, or

(ii) a withdrawal by the relevant person from the partnership of money or money's worth which does not represent income profit.

(3) For this purpose the relevant person is—

(a) where the land transfer falls within paragraph 10(1)(a) or (b), the person who makes the land transfer, and

(b) where the land transfer falls within paragraph 10(1)(c), the partner concerned or a person connected with him.

(4) The qualifying event—

(a) shall be taken to be a land transaction, and

(b) is a chargeable transaction.

(5) The partners shall be taken to be the purchasers under the transaction.

(6) Paragraphs 6 to 8 (responsibility of partners) have effect in relation to the transaction.

(7) The chargeable consideration for the transaction shall be taken to be—

(a) in a case falling within sub-paragraph (2)(a), equal to the value of the money or money's worth withdrawn from the partnership, or

(b) in a case falling within sub-paragraph (2)(b)(i), equal to the amount repaid, and

(c) in a case falling within sub-paragraph (2)(b)(ii), equal to so much of the value of the money or money's worth withdrawn from the partnership as does not exceed the amount of the loan,

but (in any case) shall not exceed the market value, as at the effective date of the land transfer, of the chargeable interest transferred by the land transfer, reduced by any amount previously chargeable to tax."

(11) For paragraph 3 of Schedule 16 there shall be substituted—

"*Bare trustee*

3(1) Subject to sub-paragraph (2), where a person acquires a chargeable interest as bare trustee, this Part applies as if the interest were vested in, and the acts of the trustee in relation to it were the acts of, the person or persons for whom he is trustee.

(2) Sub-paragraph (1) does not apply in relation to the grant of a lease.

(3) Where a lease is granted to a person as bare trustee, he is treated for the purposes of this Part, as it applies in relation to the grant of the lease, as purchaser of the whole of the interest acquired.

(4) Where a lease is granted by a person as bare trustee, he is to be treated for the purposes of this Part, as it applies in relation to the grant of the lease, as vendor of the whole of the interest disposed of."

(12) In paragraph 11 of Schedule 17A, for sub-paragraph (1) there shall be substituted—

"(1) This paragraph applies where the grant of a lease is exempt from charge by virtue of any of the provisions specified in sub-paragraph (3)."

(13) In paragraph 15A of Schedule 17A—

(a) after sub-paragraph (1) there shall be inserted—

"(1A) Where any consideration in money or money's worth (other than an increase in rent) is given by the lessee for any variation of a lease, other than a variation of the amount of the rent or of the term of the lease, the variation is treated for the purposes of this Part as an acquisition of a chargeable interest by the lessee.", and

(b) for the heading preceding that paragraph there shall be substituted "Reduction of rent or term or other variation of lease".

(14) After paragraph 18 of Schedule 17A there shall be inserted—

"Loan or deposit in connection with grant or assignment of lease

18A(1) Where, under arrangements made in connection with the grant of a lease—

(a) the lessee, or any person connected with him or acting on his behalf, pays a deposit, or makes a loan, to any person, and

(b) the repayment of all or part of the deposit or loan is contingent on anything done or omitted to be done by the lessee or on the death of the lessee,

the amount of the deposit or loan (disregarding any repayment) is to be taken for the purposes of this Part to be consideration other than rent given for the grant of the lease.

(2) Where, under arrangements made in connection with the assignment of a lease—

(a) the assignee, or any person connected with him or acting on his behalf, pays a deposit, or makes a loan, to any person, and

(b) the repayment of all or part of the deposit or loan is contingent on anything done or omitted to be done by the assignee or on the death of the assignee,

the amount of the deposit or loan (disregarding any repayment) is to be taken for the purposes of this Part to be consideration other than rent given for the assignment of the lease.

(3) Sub-paragraph (1) or (2) does not apply in relation to a deposit if the amount that would otherwise fall within the sub-paragraph in question in relation to the grant or (as the case requires) assignment of the lease is not more than twice the relevant maximum rent.

(4) The relevant maximum rent is—

(a) in relation to the grant of a lease, the highest amount of rent payable in respect of any consecutive twelve month period in the first five years of the term;

(b) in relation to the assignment of a lease, the highest amount of rent payable in respect of any consecutive twelve month period in the first five years of the term remaining outstanding as at the date of the assignment,

the highest amount of rent being determined (in either case) in the same way as the highest amount of rent mentioned in paragraph 7(3).

(5) Tax is not chargeable by virtue of this paragraph—

(a) merely because of paragraph 9(2) of Schedule 5 (which excludes the 0% band in the Tables in section 55(2) in cases where the relevant rental figure exceeds £600 a year), or

(b) merely because of paragraph 5(4)(b), 6(6)(b), 9(4)(b) or 10(6)(b) of Schedule 6 (which make similar provision in relation to land which is wholly or partly residential property and is wholly or partly situated in a disadvantaged area).

(6) Section 839 of the Taxes Act 1988 (connected persons) has effect for the purposes of this paragraph."

(15) In section 80 (adjustment where contingency ceases or consideration is ascertained) after subsection (4) there shall be inserted—

"(4A) Where the transaction ("the relevant transaction") is the grant or assignment of a lease, no claim may be made under subsection (4)—

(a) in respect of the repayment (in whole or part) of any loan or deposit that is treated by paragraph 18A of Schedule 17A as being consideration given for the relevant transaction, or

(b) in respect of the refund of any of the consideration given for the relevant transaction, in a case where the refund—

(i) is made under arrangements that were made in connection with the relevant transaction, and

(ii) is contingent on the determination or assignment of the lease or on the grant of a chargeable interest out of the lease."

(16) Subject to paragraph (22) of this Resolution, paragraphs (3) to (7) of this Resolution shall have effect where the effective date of the relevant transaction (within the meaning of paragraph 3 or 4A of Schedule 7 to the Finance Act 2003) is after 19th May 2005.

(17) Subject to paragraph (22) of this Resolution, paragraph (9) of this Resolution shall have effect where the effective date of the relevant transaction (within the meaning of paragraph 9 of Schedule 7 to the Finance Act 2003) is after 19th May 2005.

(18) Subject to paragraph (22) of this Resolution, paragraph (10) of this Resolution shall have effect where the effective date of the transaction transferring the chargeable interest to the partnership is after 19th May 2005.

(19) Subject to paragraph (22) of this Resolution, paragraphs (11) and (12) of this Resolution shall have effect where the effective date of the land transaction consisting of the grant of the lease is after 19th May 2005.

(20) Subject to paragraph (22) of this Resolution, the amendments made by the other provisions of this Resolution shall have effect in relation to any transaction of which the effective date is after 19th May 2005.

(21) In paragraphs (22) and (23) of this Resolution "the specified date" means—

(a) in relation to the amendments made by paragraphs (4)(a) and (9) of this Resolution, 19th May 2005, and

(b) in relation to the amendments made by the other provisions of this Resolution, 16th March 2005.

(22) The amendments made by this Resolution shall not have effect—

(a) in relation to any transaction which is effected in pursuance of a contract entered into and substantially performed on or before the specified date, or

(b) subject to paragraph (23) of this Resolution, in relation to any other transaction which is effected in pursuance of a contract entered into on or before the specified date.

(23) The exclusion by paragraph (22)(b) of this Resolution of transactions effected in pursuance of contracts entered into on or before the specified date shall not apply—

(a) if there is any variation of the contract or assignment of rights under the contract after that date,

(b) if the transaction is effected in consequence of the exercise after that date of any option, right of pre-emption or similar right, or

(c) if after that date there is an assignment, subsale or other transaction (relating to the whole or part of the subject-matter of the contract) as a result of which a person other than the purchaser under the contract becomes entitled to call for a conveyance to him.

(24) In this Resolution "assignment", "effective date" and "substantially performed" have the same meaning as in Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

28. STAMP DUTY AND STAMP DUTY RESERVE TAX (INTERMEDIARIES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made repealing section 117 of the Finance Act 2002.

29. SEs (STAMP DUTY AND STAMP DUTY RESERVE TAX)

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about stamp duty and stamp duty reserve tax in relation to securities issued or raised by an SE which has its registered office in the United Kingdom.

30. SEs (RESIDENCE)

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about residence for tax purposes, and changes of residence, of SEs.

31. REORGANISATION OF WATER AND SEWERAGE SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Resolved,

That provision may be made in relation to—

(a) any transfer from a Northern Ireland department to one or more transferees of property, rights and liabilities connected with the provision of water or sewerage services; and

(b) property, rights and liabilities of any transferee.

32. RELIEF FROM TAX (INCIDENTAL AND CONSEQUENTIAL CHARGES)

Resolved,

That it is expedient to authorise any incidental or consequential charges to any duty or tax (including charges having retrospective effect) that may arise from provisions designed in general to afford relief from taxation.

PROCEDURE (EU MUTUAL ASSISTANCE)

Resolved,

That, notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills, any Finance Bill of the present Session may contain provision for implementing provisions of Council Directive 77/799/EEC as amended (in particular by Council Directive 2004/56/EC).

PROCEDURE (FUTURE TAXATION)

Resolved,

That, notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills, any Finance Bill of the present Session may contain the following provisions taking effect in a future year—

(a) provision in relation to the taxation of social security pension lump sums;

(b) provision amending section 25 of the Finance Act 1990;

(c) provision in relation to authorised unit trust schemes and open-ended investment companies;

(d) provision in relation to insurance companies and friendly societies.

FINANCE [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act of the present Session relating to finance, it is expedient to authorise any increase in sums payable under any other enactment attributable to the reimbursement of expenditure in connection with the administration of stamp duty land tax.

Bill ordered to be brought in upon the foregoing resolutions: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Darling, Ms Secretary Hewitt, Secretary Alan Johnson, Secretary Ruth Kelly, Mr. Des Browne, Dawn Primarolo, John Healey and Mr. Ivan Lewis do prepare and bring it in.

FINANCE BILL

Dawn Primarolo accordingly presented a Bill to grant certain duties, to alter other duties, and to amend the law relating to the national debt and the public revenue, and to make further provisions in connection with finance: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 8].

European Union

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Gillian Merron.]*

7.44 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to raise the way in which Europe is communicated to the British public, and also ways in which greater public awareness of the EU can be achieved.

On 5 May, new Labour won an historic third term in office. An essential element of our international policy for the first two terms has been our place in Europe. Our manifesto commits us to continue to build on this strong relationship and to find new and imaginative ways of meeting the challenges of communicating the European message to the British public.

I am pleased to see the Treasury Minister in her place. I am glad to know that the new Minister for Europe is my right hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, South (Mr. Alexander). As the House knows, there have been a number of Ministers for Europe over the past eight years. I was pleased to be one of them. I am glad to see my former boss, the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), in the Chamber this evening. As for the new Minister for Europe, he has two distinct advantages over all his predecessors. First, he is the youngest Minister for Europe, so he will be able to deal with a huge number of visits with greater stamina than his slightly older predecessors. Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has decided that he should attend Cabinet meetings. In my view, that is a recognition of the importance of the portfolio, not only in informing the Cabinet of what is happening, but in getting the British people to understand that Europe is a priority for this Government.

The very word "Europe" is at once exciting and challenging, but also deeply controversial, especially in Britain. I hope in the debate to explore a number of key issues that will help us in our quest to bring the positive benefits of our membership of the EU into the homes, high streets and, dare I say it?, even the hearts of the people of this country.

Domestic and international issues are more closely linked than ever before. The issues in which Britain is involved internationally have a direct impact on our domestic agenda. It is evident that many people have a perverse perception of the remits and duties of the EU. It is important that we take this opportunity to get the factual messages across. We had an example during Prime Minister's questions today when the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) raised the issue of the EU directive on pet cemeteries. However, there is a wider context. It is worth reminding ourselves yet again that Europe is the largest single market in the world, with more than 450 million consumers, and the free movement of people, goods, services and money. The vast majority of Britain's trade is with the other member states in Europe. The EU has helped us to remove trade barriers and has generated growth and more and better jobs.

The EU has improved the environment and it has raised the standards and rights of consumers. It has helped us to fight international crime and illegal immigration much more efficiently. The Union has also brought us peace and stability for our continent and has given Europe a stronger voice in the world.

British citizens need to be reminded of what the EU is doing for them and understand how necessary it is for Britain to continue to be a strong and vibrant member state. Margot Wallstrom, the Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy, has said:

> "'Europe' is everywhere. It does have an impact on our every day lives. There are 450 million of us now and we are magnificently diverse. It has to involve the entire society. We need to build trans-European networks of humans."

This means bringing Brussels closer to Britain. This task has to be achieved on several levels, locally, nationally and internationally.

The Commission has recently launched a number of initiatives to raise awareness among EU citizens. One initiative is the so-called 1,000 debates on Europe, in which elected representatives from the local to European level are encouraged to invite their constituents to discuss the constitution. Britain has pledged to hold 20 such debates, one of which, so far, is planned to take place in the east midlands on 30 May. In a public debate for people living in Oady and Wigston, just outside my constituency, the public will hear arguments about the constitution, both for and against.

Spring day in Europe—I have not chosen the title—is another initiative to promote learning and debate about the EU in schools. The next generation—our children—will live in and relate to a completely different Europe from the Europe to which we have to relate. It is therefore vital that they be equipped with sufficient knowledge of Europe at a very early stage.

For those who choose to take advantage of the multiple possibilities that Europe offers, national boundaries will have a lesser significance. More than 750,000 Britons are already taking advantage of this right by living and working in other member states. In the near future we will, to a much greater extent, live and work in different regions of Europe, and it will be as ordinary to pick up the phone to ring Manchester as it will be to phone Portugal or Poland to speak to a friend or colleague.

Last weekend we saw one example of a great European event when all European countries come together to celebrate—the Eurovision song contest. Unfortunately, Britain did not do brilliantly this year, but neither did Spain, France or Italy. It is alleged that the smaller countries ganged up against the bigger ones. I am surprised that some sections of the media did not immediately call for our withdrawal from the EU because Britain did not win!

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD) *rose—*

Keith Vaz: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is eligible to represent the United Kingdom or Estonia, on account of his heritage.

Lembit Öpik: The hon. Gentleman must recognise that he has provoked me to defend Estonia, which had no gripe against the United Kingdom in the Eurovision song contest. Does he accept that the education that he describes offers an important opportunity to celebrate

the diversity that already exists in the UK? He knows that one of his most loyal constituents, my mother, is Estonian but has always sought to be a good citizen in Britain. That is a great way to teach people about the similarities, rather than creating fear.

Keith Vaz: I am delighted to agree with the hon. Gentleman and yet again pay tribute to his mother, who lives in Evington, in my constituency. I hope she voted the right way in the recent general election.

As the new Minister for Europe will know when he goes to the summit meetings, Europe is changing. There are no longer just two countries dominating the way in which Europe operates, either in music or in politics. Every other country feels equally involved.

On 25 February 2002 the Prime Minister and Gerhard Schröder, the German Chancellor, wrote a joint letter to José María Aznar, the Prime Minister of Spain, which then held the EU presidency. They outlined a thorough reform agenda for the future of the EU, with essential changes that would make Europe more efficient. The letter included reform proposals for the European Council to improve EU decision making—for example, keeping the agenda focused, avoiding overloaded schedules, setting fixed deadlines and preparing for each European Council more carefully. Furthermore, it suggested improving transparency, strengthening the Council secretariat, shortening meeting times and avoiding every debate going literally round the table. Can the Minister tell me how many of the boxes in that detailed proposal have been ticked, and what the Government intend to do specifically to drive the EU reform agenda forward?

Over the past five years more than 6 million jobs have been created in the EU. The telecommunications market has been opened up for competition, and the gas and electricity markets have been liberalised, which has brought a bigger and much broader choice to consumers. A deregulated air market has brought cheaper air tickets and British consumers can now enjoy flights across Europe for less than it will cost them to get a train, bus or taxi to the airport. There are endless examples of positive reasons for Britain to stay in Europe and to take an even stronger lead.

To build on this success we must continue to support the Lisbon agenda. The EU's economic reform agenda to create in Europe

"the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010"

is rightly our goal. As the House knows, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) and I were both at Lisbon. The agenda is therefore close to our hearts.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has, with his skilled craftsmanship of the economy, put Britain at the top of the league table in Europe as one of the best performing economies in the Union. But the Kok report showed how slowly the EU was performing, according to the Lisbon goals. I seek tonight a strong commitment from the Minister for Europe that the recommendations of the Kok report will be implemented in full during our presidency and that economic reform will be at the top of our agenda. That is certainly what the Chancellor implied in his vintage performance earlier this afternoon.

Last weekend the Foreign Ministers of all the member states met in Brussels to debate the EU budget. It has been suggested that the EU budget should increase by a massive 35 per cent. and that Britain should terminate its rebate. The Foreign Secretary has said:

"The rebate is justified because it is sensible and fair—but the central issue is not the rebate but the overall level of spending."

The Chancellor has been equally clear. Will the Minister also make it clear tonight that we shall not give in on the rebate? Britain does not get much out of either the cohesion funds or the common agricultural policy, and we must protect our national interest by keeping the rebate.

It would be odd to have a debate of this sort without mentioning the constitutional treaty of the EU. The treaty was signed on 29 October 2004 and the referendum Bill was presented to Parliament only yesterday by the Foreign Secretary. The treaty reinforces Britain's place at the centre of Europe and is the first ever single document to set out exactly what the EU can and cannot do.

The constitution will make substantial changes to the structure of Europe. It is a comprehensive piece of legislation and it will make Europe less complicated, more transparent, more democratic, more efficient and more legitimate in order to deal with an EU of 25. It was in fact only an extension of the Maastricht treaty signed by the Conservatives in 1992.

We are waiting in anticipation to see whether the French and the Dutch will vote yes on Sunday 29 May and Wednesday 1 June respectively. There is an urgent need for a positive campaign on the subject involving the whole spectrum of British society. To date, Spain, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia have ratified the treaty. After France and the Netherlands, Luxembourg will vote on 10 July, and Denmark on the 27 September. Ireland, Poland, Portugal, UK and the Czech Republic will all hold referendums, and Germany, Austria, Cyprus, Belgium, Estonia, Malta and Sweden will not hold referendums, but there will be a vote in Parliament. In the event that the French or the Dutch should reject the constitutional treaty, it is important that we know what the Government's position is. If either of those countries, both founding members of the EU, says no, we should abandon the referendum. As the Prime Minister said in the House this lunchtime, if there is a no vote, the matter will go back to the Council of Ministers, which will consider the position. A quick announcement from the Government will mean that there will be no period of uncertainty or hesitation. Clarity on this issue is vital.

Since 1997, the Government have worked tirelessly to put Britain back at the heart of Europe. Before that we were marginalised. During this time extraordinary successes have been reached. One of the most significant has been the enlargement of the EU just over one year ago when 10 new member states joined the Union. This success will continue with Romania and Bulgaria joining in 2007, and accession negotiations beginning with Turkey during the UK presidency in the second half of 2005. Negotiations with Croatia are on hold, and I shall be glad to hear from the Minister how they are progressing. When countries show willingness to reform and bring their economic and human rights standards in line with the rest of the EU, there should be no barriers to their joining.

[Keith Vaz]

Enlargement has been a great success. Britain has been a champion of enlargement, led by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston. I can remember, as the House will remember, just before enlargement those on the Conservative Benches telling us that there would be a crisis with the arrival of so many eastern Europeans, but that did not happen. There was no collapse of the benefit system, and 69,000 Polish people have come to the UK and they all contribute to our economy and to that of Europe.

As the House knows, the second half of 2005 will be the most important time for Britain as we hold the presidencies of the EU and the G8. I congratulate the Foreign Office on its very gracious and effective presidency logo made up of flying swans in a V-shape, and I trust that the Foreign Office is content with the presidency programme and, unlike the swan, is not just serene on the top while paddling desperately below. I am sure that it will not be, as I know that much of the work was prepared by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) when he was Minister for Europe, and I know that he will have ensured that everything was in place for the new Minister.

There is one point that I want to stress, and on which I will end, and that concerns diversity. I urge the Govt to boost the diversity agenda in Europe given that Britain is in the fortunate position of being able to lead by example on this issue. Ethnic diversity and cultural integration have come much further in the UK than in many other member states, and Britain should lead this important debate.

During my visit to the Netherlands last year, which was organised superbly by our Ambassador Sir Colin Budd and his staff at the British Embassy, I met a number of people who were concerned about how the agenda has developed in the Netherlands. We need to ensure that we adopt a position of leadership on this issue. I want the Government to give a commitment to ensuring that during our presidency, we will have events and activities to promote diversity.

Those are just some of the themes that make up the complex, irresistibly controversial blend that is Europe. The next six months give Britain the opportunity to set the agenda for Europe not only for the rest of the year, but for years ahead. With this Prime Minster, Foreign Secretary and Minister for Europe, and in this our presidency year, we really do have the chance to provide leadership not just for Europe, but through Europe, for the rest of the world. I wish the Minister for Europe well in the forthcoming six months.

8 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) for bringing this important issue to the attention of the House this evening, particularly at a time when the European Union's future is being vigorously debated not only in this country, but right across Europe. As those of us present will all recognise, my hon. Friend has been an assiduous and tireless campaigner on behalf of reform in the EU not only to make it work better, but to make it more open and accessible to all its citizens. He is joined in his experience and expertise by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), and I want to take this opportunity to place on the record my gratitude for his work during his time in the Foreign Office.

I am acutely conscious that what we may lack in numbers this evening, we make up for in quality. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), who also has an outstanding record in supporting the case for reform in the EU. It is of course commonplace to acknowledge that Britain's relationship with the EU has been one of the most strongly debated issues in this Chamber. As the new Europe takes shape, it is vital that the debate on Britain's place within it should extend outside this House and across the country.

As Europe expands and the world shrinks through globalisation, we need to ensure that the EU is equipped to continue to deliver security and prosperity to its citizens, and to meet the challenges of a globalising world. That is what the new constitutional treaty sets out to do, and it is what the debate—across Europe at this time—is about. There are sharply divided views, as the French and Dutch referendum campaigns are showing. I would argue, however, that Britain's security and prosperity are inextricably linked to Europe. It is thus clearly in our national interest to do all that we can to ensure that the EU continues to deliver prosperity to us and to all the citizens of Europe.

In a speech in the City last Friday, I said that if Britain is to take the right decision on the future of Europe and on Britain's central role in shaping that future, we must have an informed debate based on facts, not myth. I was delighted to hear those sentiments echoed in the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East this evening, and I welcome the opportunity provided by this evening's debate to set out the practical benefits to Britain of our membership of the EU, and our objectives for our forthcoming presidency.

The UK's economic growth is closely linked to our EU membership and to the trading opportunities afforded by the single market. In 2002, EU gross domestic product was 1.8 per cent.—or £110 billion more than it would have been without the single market. That represents a benefit of £20 billion to the UK economy alone. Almost 60 per cent. of our trade is with Europe. Some 3 million jobs in the UK are linked—directly or indirectly—to the export of goods and services to the EU, and some 750,000 British-based companies trade across the EU. The removal of internal frontier controls has saved EU businesses billions of euros. The abolition of customs duties alone saves British businesses an estimated £135 million a year. Without delays at frontiers, delivery times are much shorter, so manufacturers can save money and reduce prices for European consumers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East said, competition within the single market has almost halved the cost of phone calls and air fares. EU membership benefits both businesses and citizens alike.

Rigorous EU standards mean that goods and services manufactured and traded within the EU are of the highest quality and afford the most safety to consumers. The air we breathe and the water we drink are infinitely

cleaner and healthier thanks to tough environmental standards; industrial emissions of toxic substances, such as lead and mercury, have declined significantly; dangerous pesticides and chemicals have been banned; and better waste water and sewage treatment have cleaned up rivers and lakes. Nearly all the UK's beaches and rivers now meet high EU standards.

It is easy to take those benefits for granted now, and because they are good news stories we rarely hear about them in the newspapers. However, they matter to us all, so we must raise the level of awareness here in the UK that it is thanks to our EU membership that we can enjoy such a high quality of life.

Security in our homes and on our streets is central to quality of life in communities represented by hon. Members on both sides of this House. Co-operation among EU police forces and criminal justice authorities, through Europol and Eurojust, means that we can tackle international crime, drug smuggling and illegal immigration much more effectively than simply proceeding on the basis of our own national police force.

In 2005, some 32 years after our accession to the European Economic Community, the EU faces a new and very different world, and the EU, which now contains 25 member states and 450 million consumers and citizens, is a different organisation. The EU needs to adapt and change to meet the challenges of a hugely expanded Union and an increasingly competitive global marketplace. It needs to be more open and, frankly, less rigid.

In 2000, EU leaders committed themselves to an ambitious 10-year programme of far-reaching economic reform to make the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. I pay tribute to the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East for their work in advancing the so-called Lisbon strategy. The UK has led the way in pushing forward the Lisbon agenda. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East said and the Kok report pointed out, however, 2005 marks the halfway point in the strategy. Some progress has been made, but it is clear that much more needs to be done to meet the targets identified in Lisbon in 2000.

We must and will take forward the Lisbon agenda. My right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston knows the importance of that agenda, which will be a key priority for the UK during our forthcoming EU presidency. We welcome the support of President Barroso, who has already shown a strong lead on economic reform during his time as President of the European Commission. The focus on employment is right, because the EU needs more flexible labour markets. We must ensure that every proposal for new legislation is subject to a rigorous assessment of its impact on jobs, competitiveness and the wider case for growth within Europe.

We need to strike a balance between protecting workers, ensuring routes into the labour market for vulnerable workers and maintaining sufficient flexibility for business. We will focus on improving the assessment of new legislative proposals to ensure that such proposals encourage and do not stifle growth, on simplifying existing EU rules and on promoting the greater use of alternatives to regulation.

We will also work to strengthen the single market and to make progress on a single market for services. The services sector represents 60 per cent. of EU GDP, and extending the internal market to the services sector will be enormously important to business and consumers alike.

In the financial services sector, our focus will be on completing the financial services action plan in a way that protects and promotes UK and EU competitiveness.

Security will be another key priority for our EU presidency. In a world in which criminals and terrorists operate across national borders, justice and security for British citizens increasingly requires enhanced EU co-operation between police forces and judicial authorities. In the next six months, the UK presidency will take forward EU measures to improve the exchange of law enforcement information and ongoing work to conclude re-admission agreements with countries outside the EU. We will also work to agree a new long-term agenda for the Union's counter-terrorism efforts.

It is an ambitious agenda, but it is not that of the UK alone. It is the agenda of the whole Union, defined by all the member states working with the Commission and the democratically elected European Parliament, in all our interests. We hope that we can take it forward effectively and deliver real, practical results for the people of Europe. We will do so as we take forward and ensure a better understanding among the people of Britain and a better awareness of what the European Union achieves for its people: that is to say, greater prosperity and security. Through reasoned debate and a clear demonstration of the facts, we will show why the new constitutional treaty is the right treaty for Britain and the right treaty for Europe.

On the rebate, I can assure my hon. Friend that I have discussed that in recent days with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign Secretary. Indeed, I was present with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in Brussels at the General Affairs and External Relations Council on Monday. Suffice to say that I fully stand by the strong statements that have been made by both my right hon. Friends in relation to the rebate.

The constitutional treaty as drafted confirms Britain's position of strength in Europe and delivers our vision of a flexible, wider EU. It will make the new Europe of 25 nations work more effectively, as we heard this evening, with simpler decision making and greater accountability. It will be more open and, we would argue, more democratic. For the first time, as Members will know, the treaty will allow national Parliaments to have a direct say in most draft EU laws. New legislative proposals from the European Commission will be sent to national Parliaments for comments. Where there are concerns on subsidiarity, Parliaments can send the proposals back. If one third of national parliaments believe that the issue should be for national, not European, law, the Commission must withdraw the proposal.

[Mr. Douglas Alexander]

The treaty creates a full-time President of the European Council, appointed by and accountable to national Governments. The President will set the EU's agenda and represent the views of national Governments. The treaty will make the EU more efficient. For example, the size of the Commission will be reduced by one third by 2014.

Voting will be simpler and fairer. The UK's voting power will increase because the size of the population now counts. The treaty provides for majority voting where we want it most: for the single market, for reform of the common agricultural policy, and for security issues, including action against international crime and terrorism. But on questions of tax, social security, foreign policy, defence and financing of the Union, at UK insistence decisions can be taken only by unanimity.

Keith Vaz: That is an excellent exposition of the importance of the treaty, but could my right hon. Friend address himself to the issue of what will happen to Britain's position if France or the Netherlands votes no? Will we go ahead with our referendum, or will we scrap it and take the matter back to the Council of Ministers?

Mr. Alexander: I stand by the comments that the Prime Minister has made. He has made it clear that our process of ratification involves a referendum, so if there is a constitutional treaty to ratify, it will be done by the British people by means of the referendum set out in the Bill that I am glad to say we introduced into this place yesterday.

On the involvement of the European Council, given the terms of the treaty and what would be expected, in the first instance it is important to place on record the fact that none of us can judge at this stage what will be the outcome of the referendum in France or the Netherlands. It would therefore be unwise to hypothesise and better to wait only a few remaining days until the position is clearer across the European Union.

I welcome the opportunity that the constitutional treaty provides for engaging in a fundamental argument with those here in this Chamber and in the country who see Britain's future as standing outwith the European Union. There is a strong case to be made on the basis of prosperity and security, as I have tried to outline this evening, and Britain's future lies within a reforming European Union. On that basis, the constitutional treaty provides exactly the sort of framework for which we, and Members present in the House, have been working and striving—for exactly the kind of reforming Europe that we want to see. As I made clear in my remarks—

The motion having been made after Seven o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at fourteen minutes past Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 26 May 2005

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

The Secretary of State was asked—

Government Borrowing

1. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on the level of Government net borrowing. [990]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Des Browne): Deficits are falling each year. From last year to this year, and for each year for which figures are published until 2009–10, the UK deficit is lower than every deficit in the G7 except Canada, and is lower than the deficits of the USA, France, Germany and Japan.

With leave, Mr. Speaker, may I ask the whole House to pay tribute to my predecessor? As Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Paul Boateng oversaw two spending reviews with dedication and panache, and was known for his fairness, integrity and commitment to his job. As the right hon. Member for Brent, South, he served his constituents tirelessly for 18 years, increasing his share of the vote in every election since he was elected to the House in 1987. I am sure that the House would want to join me in wishing him well in the challenges that he faces in South Africa.

Mr. Gray: I am not certain that I will join the Minister in that eloquent paean of praise, but I wish the people of South Africa well when his predecessor arrives.

In welcoming the Minister to his new role, may I inquire whether he is as confident as his next-door neighbour, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, that the economy will grow by 3 per cent. this year? If that is the case, why did he fail to answer my direct and straightforward question—namely, how much borrowing do we expect for this year? We know that it is £32 billion. If the economy is growing at 3 per cent., why does he have to borrow £32 billion?

Mr. Browne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I had hoped to be able to welcome him to the Front Bench, but, unfortunately, I was not quick enough, so I shall welcome him to the Back Benches instead.

It is well known that moderate borrowing is necessary to bridge the years of under-investment in public services, which cannot be put right quickly. It will take years of sustained investment to address that historic under-investment. The hon. Gentleman's own party is entirely responsible for the circumstances that require that borrowing.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): May I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post? I agree entirely that the levels of borrowing are perfectly sensible and reasonable and are low, both historically and internationally. Does he not agree that it is much more important to keep the economy going by borrowing if necessary to sustain consumer demand so that we tackle unemployment and continue the great legacy of the past eight years?

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome. He is perfectly correct that we have had an unprecedented period of stability in the economy, which has allowed us the opportunity to make the investment in public services, and that is reflected in borrowing.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman share the Treasury's forecasts for the growth in the economy?

Mr. Browne: The forecasts on all aspects of the United Kingdom economy are made regularly, and are quite transparent. Since the introduction of the new framework in 1997, forecasts have on average been cautious and inexorably have turned out to be correct. In recent years, Her Majesty's Treasury's forecasts have tended to be more accurate and cautious than many who have commented on them.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is only right to borrow to invest? Borrowing is now lower than at any time under the previous Administration, who borrowed to fund unemployment in constituencies such as mine in Bridgend.

Mr. Browne: Of course, the bills for unemployment amounted to about £5 billion, which is more than was being spent on the schools budget when we came to power. My hon. Friend is perfectly correct about the stability and transparency that we have introduced into the economy, and the fact that our regular forecasts have consistently proved to be correct. That investment is delivering increased and improved public services in all our constituencies, including her own.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I congratulate the Chief Secretary on his appointment and look forward to having a constructive debate with him over the coming months. Because of the level of net borrowing, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development said this week that in the absence of a spontaneous rise in tax receipts, a slowdown in spending will be required. If that spontaneous rise does not happen, do the Government have a plan B? Is it to cut spending or to raise taxes?

Mr. Browne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome and congratulations, and I, too, congratulate

him. I look forward to a constructive relationship with him. He will know, of course, that the deficit is falling and that we are on course to meet our fiscal rules. In relation to tax, this Government have kept and will continue to keep our promises. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, decisions on tax rates are made as part of the tax—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Chancellor is speaking up in relation to tax, and in the general election campaign he was asked similar questions to those that I am being asked. In relation to plan B in respect of tax, he said on the Radio 4 "Today" programme, on 24 September 2004, before the election:

"To give a blanket pledge that whatever the economic circumstances, whether or not the country could afford it, we could reduce the tax burden would be wrong".

In the context of being asked about tax increases, he said:

"We have not ruled out increasing taxes or national insurance".

He therefore wishes to do exactly what the Government do and to keep the issues under review.

G7 Presidency

2. **Mr. Sadiq Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): What proposals for debt relief the UK plans to bring forward during its presidency of the G7; and if he will make a statement. [991]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Following the European Union agreement to double aid to 0.56 per cent. of GDP by 2010, Britain will seek European Union and G7 agreement on a debt relief package for 100 per cent. relief for debts owed by poor countries to the international financial institutions. We will also seek agreement on a finance facility for vaccination, which could save the lives of 5 million children by 2015, and for long-term finance to meet the millennium development goals. I hope that there will be all-party support for those initiatives.

Mr. Khan: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently had the pleasure of visiting Tooting and meeting local faith groups who did so much in the Jubilee 2000 campaign to help to cancel debt. What advice would he give to the churches, mosques, temples and other communities in Tooting who want to work with this Labour Government finally to make poverty history?

Mr. Brown: I thank all the churches and faith groups, not only in Britain but throughout the world for the work that they have done so far in putting the issue on the agenda. I was pleased to visit the constituency of my hon. Friend, and I welcome him to the House. I saw him playing his part in making the case for debt relief and increases in development aid. The next few weeks are vital for those of us who wish to see a reduction in global poverty. By the time of Gleneagles, I believe that we can achieve an historic agreement that will make possible greater aid and substantial debt relief. We have persuaded a large number of countries to join us, we need to persuade other countries over the next few weeks, and if we can do so, the agreement at Gleneagles will release billions of pounds to the poorest countries.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Given that many in Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad depend on cotton for between 30 and 40 per cent. of their export earnings, does the Chancellor agree that the continued and extortionate subsidy by the United States of its inefficient cotton sector damages massively the western central African economies' chances of meeting the millennium development goals? Does he accept that he will command support from the Opposition if he can use his influence with the Americans to bring an end to those subsidies and to give the poorest people in the world the chance to compete and to grow?

Mr. Brown: Overseas development aid amounts to $50 billion a year, and trade subsidies by the richest countries, which discriminate against the poor, amount to $300 billion a year. Whether in agriculture, sugar, or cotton and textiles, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, those discriminatory subsidies do huge harm to the poorest countries. That is why we look forward not only to the Gleneagles agreement on debt relief and aid but to the Hong Kong talks of the world trade agreement. Not for the first time this week, I find myself in agreement with the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): May I warmly welcome the answer that the Chancellor gave to the original question on the Order Paper? Does he agree that bilateral aid between ourselves and a particular country can be much more effective than aid given through a third party? Will he seek to concentrate more of our aid through bilateral aid agreements with individual countries, such as those to which my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) referred, rather than seeking to channel more through third parties?

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have trebled aid for Africa over the last few years. I am aware that, owing to his association with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Union, he has both welcomed that and seen some of the good effects that it has produced.

This is the first time that I have heard the hon. Gentleman describe the European Union as a third party—it may be due to the change that is taking place in the Conservative party—but if I were to talk about third parties, I would say that he should support the work of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. I think that on this occasion at least, the Conservative party should be generous enough to support the decision made by the European Union this week. It was an historic decision—that all 25 countries would play their part in doubling European aid between now and 2010. Even the poorest EU countries agreed to move their aid budgets to 0.17 per cent. That was a sign that even the poorer EU countries recognised their responsibilities to the rest of the world. I should have thought that at a time of reflection for the Conservatives, they would take the opportunity at least to welcome one thing that has come out of the European Union.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress he is making in setting the agenda globally on this extremely important issue. I also welcome the EU agreement that was announced

two days ago. Can my right hon. Friend give us his assessment of how likely it is that the United States will be brought on board by the time of the Gleneagles meeting?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has also taken a huge interest in these issues.

The Americans support our initiative on debt relief, and I believe that we are closer to an agreement on multilateral debt relief than we have been at any time. In 1999, an agreement was reached on bilateral debt relief, and we and other countries removed the costs that countries in the poorer world had to pay for debt servicing. It is now possible that the other half of the debt owed by the poorest countries—the multilateral debt—could be written down, with all G7 countries supporting the move. I believe that the Americans, like the rest of Europe, are ready to reach an agreement on debt relief.

As my hon. Friend will know, the American Administration have proposed substantial increases in aid for HIV/AIDS and education through the millennium challenge account. One of the purposes of the Prime Minister's visit to America over the next few days is to see whether we can bring together Europe, Japan and America, so that at Gleneagles we can agree a plan for Africa, and at the United Nations special summit in September we can agree with the rest of the world that it will share the priority that we have accorded to Africa.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): Poverty, disease and poor education blight the lives of hundreds of millions of people, and we have a moral duty to help. Today the Chancellor has called for all-party support on those issues, and at this first Treasury Question Time of the new Parliament, I offer him our support.

Does the Chancellor agree that we now need to build a broader international consensus? What prospects does he see of our using the good will that this country and, indeed, the Prime Minister have built up in the United States to secure backing for the speedy establishment of an international finance facility?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful for that all-party support—I believe that the Liberal Democrats and the other parties in the House will also support this initiative. It is important for Britain to signal to the rest of the world that the whole United Kingdom Parliament is united in our efforts to tackle the problems of developing countries.

The hon. Gentleman has raised again the attitude of the American Administration to the initiative, and particularly to our proposed international finance facility. Progress has been made on the facility, which involves front-loading funds so that we can do very special things early in order to be in a position to meet the millennium development goals. A number of Governments around the world, and the Gates Foundation, have come together to propose an international finance facility for vaccination and immunisation. As I have told the House, that would release an extra $4 billion for the vaccination and immunisation of children who would otherwise not have such treatment. Between now and 2015, 5 million lives could be saved by that one measure, and I believe that it will be endorsed at Gleneagles.

There is a good deal of discussion still to take place on the more general funding of the international finance facility and other measures that could raise additional finance, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that there has been progress over the last few months. That progress will be enhanced by the all-party agreement on these issues.

Mr. Osborne: I agree that there has been progress but, as the Chancellor points out, each day that progress towards the millennium development goals is delayed, 30,000 children lose their lives, 100 million children miss out on education and 1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members are muttering, but we are trying to establish broad consensus on the point.

Fifteen months ago, the Chancellor said that he wanted to establish the international finance facility immediately. The Secretary of State for International Development rightly said:

"You don't need everybody on board to launch the IFF."

I take the point that the Chancellor just made about the international finance facility and vaccinations, but does he expect the broader international finance facility to be up and running during Britain's G7 presidency this year?

Mr. Brown: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman supports the international finance facility both as an idea and for its practical development in vaccination and other areas. At the meeting of European Union Finance Ministers only a few days ago, all 25 countries of the European Union agreed that we could support an international finance facility. It was agreed that we had to find a way to fund it after 2015, and further work is being done on how to guarantee that funding. However, there was a time when there were sceptics in the European Union and people in other countries thought that the proposal was impractical, but it is now accepted that we should move forward. Whatever happens and however many countries join the international finance facility, it will be established, and I am grateful that we have the support of all parties—I believe that that includes the Liberal Democrats.

The broad agenda for development, trade and aid is debt relief to deal with the burdens of the past, raising development aid so that we can build up the capacity of the countries that we are talking about, particularly their health and education systems, opening up trade—a point already raised by Opposition Members—which is absolutely right and the only long-term source of development and growth for those countries, and prioritising funding by front-loading it through the international finance facility. That is a major package and if we can secure agreement on it at Gleneagles, it will not only be welcomed by the Churches in Britain but people around the world will think that the G8 presidency has achieved a great deal.

Mr. John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): I will be joining local schools and churches in the Edinburgh rally on 2 July in advance of Gleneagles. What message can the Chancellor give to encourage more of my constituents to attend that rally, particularly

on the issues of achieving millennium development goals and the revaluation of the International Monetary Fund gold reserves to write off more debt?

Mr. Brown: When the issue of debt relief was raised in 1996–97, no one ever thought that 100 per cent. write-off of bilateral debt would be possible. However, thousands of people, churches and faith groups in all constituencies around the country sent out a message not only to Britain but to Germany, France, Japan and America to take action. There is absolutely no doubt that, when large numbers of people have got together to force the issue on to the agenda, it has made a difference.

On one occasion, the German Finance Minister accused me of organising for thousands of postcards to be sent from different addresses in Britain to the German Finance Ministry and thought that it was part of an orchestrated Treasury campaign. We would never have been able to approve such a use of public money. However, that action did make a difference, as has the work of churches and faith groups in all countries, which is why every member of public who can should register their support for this campaign.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): There is support across the House for the imperative of debt relief, for securing fairer trade rules and for the work of the Commission for Africa, and Gleneagles will be vital on all those fronts. What objective, measurable criteria should we use to measure the success of Gleneagles in achieving success on those fronts?

Mr. Brown: I had thought that there had been a change in the Liberal Democrat shadow chancellorship overnight until I was informed that the real shadow Chancellor for that party had not realised that the hours of the House had changed—yet another example of the Liberal Democrats getting their figures wrong. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his promotion and I welcome his question.

The test of Gleneagles will be whether we can achieve substantial progress on debt relief, whether we can raise substantially the amount of development aid, whether we can prepare for a breakthrough on trade—it would happen in Hong Kong in December—and whether we can build a new relationship between the richest and the poorest countries, which I believe all hon. Members would wish to see.

National Insurance Contributions

3. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): If he will make a statement on levels of national insurance contributions. [993]

4. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds) (Con): What representations he has received regarding the yield from employees' national insurance contributions. [994]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Des Browne): National insurance contribution rates are set in the Budget. The estimated national insurance contribution receipts for 2004–05 are £77.9 billion, as stated in the 2005 Budget. The Government receive a number of representations on a wide variety of issues. The Government's aim is to ensure that there is a fair system for individuals, employers and taxpayers. That is why, in 1999, the Government made the largest reforms to the national insurance system since the 1970s, including abolishing the entry fee and employee contributions, raising the threshold for contributions and aligning it with the personal allowance for income tax. Finally, it simplified the structure of employers' national insurance contributions.

Ann Winterton: Bearing in mind that national insurance is a form of direct taxation, will the Chief Secretary reaffirm to the House the Chancellor's implied assurance during the recent general election campaign that there would be no increase in national insurance rates during this Parliament?

Mr. Browne: The hon. Lady will be aware that we made our commitments on tax in our election manifesto, which I am sure that she has read. We have given an undertaking not to change the higher or basic rate of tax. I am not going to be drawn on this issue by a member of a party whose own spokesperson during the course of the election campaign said:

"We have not ruled out increasing . . . national insurance".

That was the shadow Chancellor, speaking on "The Daily Politics" on 21 April.

Mr. Ruffley: May I draw the attention of the House to the *Hansard* for 27 November 1996? The then Labour shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr. Brown), said that

"national insurance is a tax on ordinary families"—[*Official Report*, 27 November 1996; Vol. 286, c. 365.]

Is that still the Chancellor's view?

Mr. Browne: The Chancellor can speak for himself on those issues. The national insurance position is that we have raised it in the context of further investment in the national health service, which the country overwhelmingly supported. I remind Conservative Members that the extra money contributed towards real growth in NHS spending, which was the result of the legacy of the Conservative Government's underspend in that sector for many years.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): It is still the case that many benefits, including incapacity benefit and the basic state pension, depend on national insurance contributions, but many women continue to find it difficult to build up sufficient credits, particularly if they have home care responsibilities. A woman looking after two elderly relatives for 15 hours each per week is a good example. It means that, although she is working for 30 hours a week, because each commitment is 15 hours—less than the required 16 hours—she will not receive any national insurance credits. Will the Chief Secretary undertake to look further into this problem to assess whether there is a way of widening the basis for credits in order to allow more women to build them up to qualify either for a basic state pension or incapacity benefit?

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. This matter exercises the minds of many hon. Members, and employers face logistical difficulties in the

circumstances that she describes. We keep these matters under constant review, but the House will know that it was the legacy of pension-age people in poverty, especially women, that caused this Government, in our early years, to give attention to increasing the pension for such people by means of the pension credit system.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that making the right investment at the right time will ensure the growth and modernisation of the NHS, the employment of more doctors, nurses and health professionals and that use remains free at the point of delivery, and that that is precisely what the electors of West Lancashire voted for on 5 May?

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and take this opportunity to welcome her to the House of Commons and to congratulate her on her election. She has reminded the Opposition of the success of the Government's investment in the NHS, and their catcalls in response say it all. Of course, extra investment was needed, and the Government's approach was correct. By 2008, we will have 80,000 more nurses, midwives and health visitors, 25,000 more doctors and 100 new hospitals. Yesterday, the shadow Chancellor did not answer the important question in respect of that investment in the NHS: does he support it, or would he reverse it?

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his post. Does he accept that ordinary families in my constituency warmly welcome extra investments in the NHS? We now have better services for people with cardiac problems and cancer, and especially for women with breast cancer who desperately need help. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that the extra investment that we have been promised will be delivered, and that services will be even better in the future?

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for her welcome.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): There is not all-party agreement on this issue.

Mr. Browne: I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) says from a sedentary position. I believe that there is all-party agreement on this, and I am sure that that is true in constituencies across the country. I have no doubt that some hon. Members claimed credit for that in their election literature. The money has assured better health outcomes and reduced waiting lists. The additional resources and the linked package of reforms will ensure the delivery of our priorities in respect of health.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The Minister should remember that he is a Scottish Member and that, in the election, English voters did not favour his party with a majority. He is now a Minister of the Crown, responsible to this House, so will he say whether there will be any element of national insurance increase during this Parliament?

Mr. Browne: The hon. Gentleman gives me an opportunity to remind the House that his party stands for election in Scotland on a banner that proclaims it as the Conservative and Unionist party. The people of Scotland understand that the Conservative party is a UK party. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) took the same point to the level of caricature, and it cost him his Front-Bench position. I have already answered the hon. Gentleman's question, and it is not my intention to be drawn on this issue.

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The changes in national insurance contributions have provided much-needed investment in the NHS. However, will the Government make a commitment that public funds will not be diverted from the NHS to subsidise the private sector?

Mr. Browne: My hon. Friend knows how much the Government have invested in a public health service that remains free at the point of delivery and that the changes and modernisations announced in our election manifesto will ensure that we achieve the level of delivery that our investment predicates.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk) (Con): May I add my congratulations to the Chief Secretary, but has he had the opportunity to read a collection of essays published this week entitled "The New Egalitarianism" by Mr. Patrick Diamond, who is imminently to be head of the reshaped Downing street policy unit?

In those essays, he not only calls for the removal of the national insurance ceiling, but recommends a capital transfer tax to prevent people from passing assets to their children to avoid inheritance tax. In view of the importance of that new role for Mr. Diamond, what contact have Treasury Ministers had with him to discuss his views? Does he offer a foretaste of what is to come?

Mr. Browne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I have never met the individual in question. In fact, I do not even know of him. As I understand it, he is not head of the policy unit and the description the hon. Gentleman gives does not properly describe the individual's future. It is not my understanding that he is about to take up the position that is suggested. The individual does not represent the Government's position and does not speak in any way for the Government on national insurance or on inheritance or any other tax. The Government made our position clear on those matters in our manifesto.

Borrowings Forecast

5. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): If he will make a statement on the Treasury's forecast on borrowings over the next five years. [995]

10. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold) (Con): If he will make a statement on the level of Government net borrowing. [1001]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Forecasts of net borrowing are set out in the pre-Budget report and the Budget. The latest estimate in the Budget is £32 billion for 2005–06 and £29 billion, £27 billion, £24 billion and £22 billion for the following years.

I take this opportunity to announce that I am appointing Mr. David Walton to the Monetary Policy Committee in place of Marian Bell.

Michael Fabricant: I thank the Chancellor for that interesting response and for his mini-statement. He will know that the current deficit is now £5 billion more than forecast, and that the International Monetary Fund said in March:

"The fiscal position deteriorated sharply over the past five years".

The Chancellor will probably brush that off by saying, "Hey, whatever." But what steps will he take to improve Treasury forecasting?

Mr. Brown: I think that the hon. Gentleman knows that our deficit is lower than almost all our comparable competitor countries, as is our debt level. As for forecasts, the last Conservative Government were not £2 billion or £3 billion out in their forecasts in the early 1990s. In 1992–93, their forecast was £49 billion wrong and in 1993–94 it was £51 billion wrong, but they did better in 1994–95 because they were only £43 billion out.

As for the issue of borrowing and spending, perhaps the hon. Gentleman would care to contemplate what he said to his electors in the recent election—

Michael Fabricant: My majority increased.

Mr. Brown: Far from the hon. Gentleman telling people that his party would spend less, he was getting votes by telling people that he wanted to spend even more on public spending. He said:

"Staffordshire schools are 145th out of 150 for . . . funding . . . despite Labour's promise, our authorities are worse off . . . I will continue to fight for [more] funding for Staffordshire schools."

The hon. Gentleman can lecture us about spending when he shows the same discipline himself.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. That was a misquote—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I welcome the Chancellor back to his post. In addition to the huge figures that he has just read out for our fiscal deficit, the Office for National Statistics and others have made good technical arguments that the debt figures for the private finance initiative, the Strategic Rail Authority and even the burgeoning public sector pensions should be added to our total debt figure. That amounts to a massive figure, and one of the highest in our history. The Chancellor used to talk about prudence for a purpose. A prudent Chancellor would address this huge problem. Will he increase taxation or cut spending to deal with it?

Mr. Brown: We follow exactly the same rules on the private finance initiative and on the way in which we calculate debt and borrowing as the Conservative Government did. If anything, we are ready to tighten up the rules and make them more transparent in a way in which they were not prepared to do. The idea that we have more debt as a percentage of national income under the Labour Government is completely wrong. We have cut debt from 44 per cent. to just over 33 per cent. of national income. Over the years we have reduced debt substantially, against the advice of Opposition Members. The hon. Gentleman may think twice about lecturing us on overspending and over-borrowing, because in a press release just before the general election he demanded more spending on agriculture.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend remember how prudently he treated the £22 billion proceeds from the 3G mobile phones auction, by paying off a large slice of Government borrowing? Will he contrast that with the sheer fiscal irresponsibility of treating one-off privatisation proceeds as negative Government spending, which happened under the Conservative Government? Does he agree that not even a grocer's shop in Grantham, let alone the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), would play so fast and loose with finances as the Tories did with the country's finances when they were in power?

Mr. Brown: I remember that during the spectrum auction when we raised £22 billion—people said that that would not be possible, but we managed to do it—Conservative Members said, not that we should use the money to reduce the national debt, but that we should use it for public spending. The idea that we have a disciplined and fiscally responsible Opposition party is knocked on its head, not just by that instance, but by every Opposition Member during the election campaign making irresponsible promises for more spending so as to gain votes. We shall expose that week after week throughout this Parliament.

Hugh Bayley (City of York) (Lab): Why did the national debt double under the previous Conservative Government, and what were the consequences of their short-term irresponsible borrowing decisions on public expenditure on health and education? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I hear what the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) is saying, but the Chancellor can speak of the history of his Department, even under a previous Government.

Mr. Brown: It is sometimes difficult to explain the logic behind Conservative decisions. Debt and borrowing will rise if we do not cut unemployment bills. That is what happened under the Conservative Government and we are determined not to allow it to happen in this Parliament or in future. I invite the Conservative party to reconsider its opposition to the new deal. Two million people have been helped by it and there are 2.2 million more people in work. A reason why debt is lower and borrowing is less than it would otherwise have been is that we have saved £5 billion by halving the unemployment benefits bill. We want to continue to do so and both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties should support us in doing so.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): The Chancellor will be aware that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has predicted a less than 60 per cent. chance that the Chancellor will meet the golden rule on borrowing, yet on Sunday he said on television that we have been

meeting the golden rule and will continue to do so. Does that mean that he is predicting a near 100 per cent. chance that he will meet the golden rule in future?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman does not need to take it from me; he just needs to take it from the shadow Chancellor, who on the radio last Friday said that he believed that we would meet our golden rule. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should have some conversations with his shadow Chancellor.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in the last eight years we have been hearing from the Tory party in particular and to a lesser degree from the Liberal Democrats of the possibility of a black hole in Government funding? The black holes were in 1997 when we secured a victory and they fell down a black hole, in 2001 when we secured a victory and they fell down another black hole, and at our last election victory when not only did they fall in yet another black hole, but the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), then shadow Chancellor, got lost in a black hole in the middle of the Dorset woods.

Mr. Brown: We should not enter the private grief of the Conservative party. I think all of us were disappointed that we were not present at last night's meeting of the Conservative party, to hear the speeches from so many different candidates for the leadership. I do say to the Conservative party, though, and to every Member of the House: you cannot wish for increases in health and education without being prepared to make the commitment to the public investment. And even at the last general election the shadow Chancellor, who as shadow Chief Secretary was responsible for discipline in public expenditure, was making special promises to himself, for his own constituency, on roads and other issues—spending promises that were way beyond what this Government could afford and way beyond what the Conservative party was saying nationally it could afford. Every month we will remind Conservative Members of the manifesto promises they made.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) rightly points out, this week even the Office for National Statistics confesses the need to make material changes to the way it classifies private finance initiative projects in calculating aggregate Government borrowing. Will the Chancellor now accept that the public's lack of trust that the presentation of official statistics is free from political manipulation necessitates Treasury forecasts being subject to the framework for statistical accountability proposed by the Conservative party?

Mr. Brown: It is the Labour Government who have given greater independence to the statistical services in this country. I may say that the hon. Gentleman misrepresents the announcement by the statistical office over the last few days. What the press release from the statistical office says—I have it here—is:

"The Office for National Statistics has taken no decision to change the treatment of PFI schemes in the public finances."

So I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post, but perhaps he might withdraw the allegation that he made.

As for the Conservative party's proposal, which it never put into practice when in government, that all public finances be submitted to an independent committee, rather like the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, I do say—this is the argument that the Conservatives use in relation to the European Union—that the final decisions on public finances, and therefore on taxation, in this country have always historically been made by this House of Commons; and the Government answer to this House of Commons, so I do not believe that an independent committee doing that is the way forward for this country. If the Tories do not believe in it for Europe, they should not believe in it for Britain either.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Early in the last Parliament, in a debate in Westminster Hall on PFI, I, as a public sector accountant, put very vigorously to the then Member for Brent, South, Mr. Boateng, the fact that a great deal of PFI debt should be on balance sheet. In the press release from which the Chancellor just quoted, issued by the ONS a few days ago, the ONS acknowledged that it had known about the uncertainty of treatment of PFI debt since 2001. Can my right hon. Friend inquire of the ONS, and then relay to the House at a later date, why it has taken more than four years for it to realise that the treatment of PFI debt did not comply with international standards?

Mr. Brown: Forty billion pounds of PFI capital are on balance sheet. The most controversial proposal of PFI, the London Underground, is on balance sheet. My hon. Friend is talking about the technical issue of whether, in addition to the capital that is owed, the borrowing commitments of the single-purpose companies that have been set up should also be on the balance sheet. We are happy to listen to the views of the Office for National Statistics and take its advice on the matter, but the fact is that, contrary to what was being said a few minutes ago, the ONS statement says that it has made

"no decision to change the treatment of PFI schemes in the public finances",

and I suppose that until that is done, every Member of the House would want us to abide by the existing rules, which is what we will do.

Climate Change Levy

6. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): If he will make a statement on the effect of the climate change levy on manufacturing output. [997]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (John Healey): We published an independent evaluation of the climate change levy alongside the Budget this year. It was undertaken by Cambridge Econometrics. This estimated that with the levy, the total economy output should increase by 0.07 per cent. by 2010, compared with a situation without the climate change levy in place.

Mr. Evans: Is it not true that when this tax was introduced it was supposed to be tax neutral? Last year it raised £800 million. Since 1997, we have lost 1 million manufacturing jobs in this country. The Labour-dominated Trade and Industry Committee has asked

the Government to review the workings of the climate change levy to help manufacturing industry in this country during its difficulties. That plea was backed by the Engineering Employers Federation. How many more manufacturing jobs will be lost in this country before the Government do something about the climate change levy?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman will remember that the climate change levy was introduced with off-setting tax cuts that, in fact, are worth more than the amount raised by the levy. Frankly, the picture that he paints of British manufacturing is contrary to the figures. I have the statistics here: in 2004, manufacturing output was 1.4 per cent. up, manufacturing investment was 3.2 per cent. up, productivity was 5.3 per cent. up and manufacturing exports were 2 per cent. up. Clearly, many British manufacturing firms are not thinking what the hon. Gentleman is thinking.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that much research and development work is being undertaken in this country that is beneficial to addressing climate change issues. The Government have introduced an important R and D tax credit, but may we have an assurance from the Government that that tax credit will continue and that they will look closely at supporting R and D that addresses climate change issues?

John Healey: My hon. Friend takes a close interest in these matters, and he is absolutely right: we have introduced for the first time a tax credit for research and development in this country. It has been worth £700 million to British business since we introduced it. We have also put in place other tax measures, such as enhanced capital allowances, to support the sort of research, development and technology that he is keen to see. The real question, which relates not just to climate change but to support for manufacturing, is whether we as a country are prepared to invest in the skills, innovation, research and development, science and business support that will secure our manufacturing for the future—the promises and spending that the Government have made, which the Conservative party failed to match during the election campaign.

Unemployment (Glasgow)

9. **John Robertson** (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on unemployment levels in Glasgow. [1000]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Ivan Lewis): Since 1997, the Government's labour market reforms have contributed to a fall in unemployment in Glasgow of almost 50 per cent., to a record low of 4.2 per cent.

John Robertson: May I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, welcome him to his new post and wish him all the best? Although unemployment has improved in Glasgow—1,100 more young people have been put into employment thanks to the new deal—it still has one of the highest unemployment rates of any city in the country. What does my hon. Friend propose to do to try to eradicate unemployment in Glasgow? May I ask him to visit the city to see its problems for himself?

Mr. Lewis: I would be delighted to visit Glasgow at any time. We will continue our policies of economic stability, which are absolutely central to maximising employment. We will also continue our new deal programme, which has reduced youth unemployment in Glasgow by 70 per cent. and long-term unemployment by more than 90 per cent. We will extend that new deal to skills to support employability for life, and that is in contrast to the Conservative party. The shadow Chancellor said in the House in January that he would abolish the new deal—there is nothing new about that—and leave such things to the market, whatever the consequences for individuals, communities and our society. The only intergenerational unemployment that the Labour party is prepared to tolerate is that of Leaders of the Opposition and shadow Chancellors.

Taxation

12. **David T.C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): What mechanisms he uses to assess the effect of the level of taxation on the state of the economy. [1003]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Ivan Lewis): The Government's macro-economic framework has consistently delivered stability, with strong growth and low inflation, establishing a track record that has been internationally acknowledged. The Government's approach to taxation balances the need to finance better-quality public services, promotes sustainable development and ensures a fair tax environment.

David T.C. Davies: Under this Government, 1 million jobs have been lost in the manufacturing industries, as a result of the 66 tax rises that they have levied. Why will the Chancellor of the Exchequer not come himself to the Dispatch Box to answer a very simple question: does he have plans to raise national insurance levels—yes or no?

Mr. Lewis: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House and urge him not to get too excited in future.

The consequences of the tax policies deployed by this Chancellor and this Government are simple: lowest interest rates, lowest mortgage rates, lowest inflation, record levels of sustained investment in public services and the World Bank saying that the UK is the best country in Europe for business. The hon. Gentleman really should speak to his Front-Bench colleagues about taxation. The shadow deregulation Minister wants bigger tax cuts—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I shall stop the Minister there.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): Will the Minister try to nail once and for all in the House the lie or misunderstanding that a low-tax economy is a golden rule for a growing or buoyant economy? For every low-tax economy in the world that has been successful I can point to one that was unsuccessful and to a high-tax economy that was a buoyant success. What is important is not necessarily the level of taxation, although I realise that there is an absolute level, but the effective use of

resources by Governments. Can my hon. Friend give us an assurance that he will try to turn the argument to how effectively we use resources for the benefit of our country?

Mr. Lewis: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. What is important is that we have a fair tax system supported by a stable economy, which enables us to invest in public services. Under the previous Government, we had an ideological commitment that put tax as the first priority. It led to the slashing of public services and meant that we had a boom and bust economy, with all its consequences for individuals and businesses.

Red Diesel

13. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whether non-commercial boat users will be able to purchase red diesel after 31 December 2006. [1004]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (John Healey): Private boat owners in Britain are permitted to use red diesel under a derogation of the European energy products directive, which is due to expire at the end of 2006. We shall be discussing that and other derogations of the directive in Europe closer to that time. Before that, we shall hold further discussions with boat owners and their associations.

Mr. Carmichael: The use of small non-commercial boats is integral to the way of life of many people living in island and coastal communities. If the diesel used in those boats is to become subject to fuel duty, that use will be greatly curtailed. The move to charging duty will inevitably be bureaucratic and will add many infrastructure costs for the many small piers in my constituency. Will the Minister pursue the question with urgency both in his Department and with the EU Commission as, in those terms, the end of 2006 is approaching rapidly?

John Healey: I remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that commercial boat owners are entitled to use fuel with no duty at all. I welcomed the early-day motion that he tabled in the last Parliament, which commended the Government on securing the derogation in negotiations on the energy products directive.

Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman, if I can. We shall take the decision on whether to seek to extend the derogation in good time. We shall hold full discussions with those who have interests and are concerned about that beforehand, and when we make the decision we shall take into account all factors that may be relevant—social, economic and environmental.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy) (Lab): I hear what my hon. Friend is saying, but will he agree to meet a delegation from my constituency of people who are raising issues similar to the ones set out by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael)?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is assiduous in bringing delegations from her constituency to meet me. I rarely respond to a question from her in the Chamber without troubling my diary secretary. Of course, I shall be pleased to meet whatever delegation representing the interests of private boat owners from her constituency that she wishes to bring to see me.

Tax Credits (Over-payments)

17. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South) (Lab): How many recipients of tax credits in Coventry, South constituency have been identified as having received over-payments. [1008]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): The statistics for the over-payment of tax credits will be published by the Office for National Statistics on 1 June. I draw the House's attention to a statement that I made this morning reflecting on the comments made by Members of Parliament on the system and on how to improve it.

Mr. Cunningham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, but will she consider the issue of the over-payment of child benefit, particularly when young families have to pay the money back and given the hardship that might be involved in that?

Dawn Primarolo: I know that my hon. Friend is a champion of his constituents and, in particular, the nearly 6,400 families who receive payments from the tax credits. Among the issues that have been raised with me by Members of the House are those of over-payments, improving the procedures for the recovery of over-payment, better communication with families about their entitlement and clearly identifying that entitlement on the award notices. I am precisely focusing on those items as a result of comments made by Members of the House, including my hon. Friend.

Business of the House

11.30 am

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for the week after the recess?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The business of the House for the week after the Whitsun recess is as follows:

MONDAY 6 JUNE—Second Reading of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill.

TUESDAY 7 JUNE—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

WEDNESDAY 8 JUNE—Opposition Day [1st Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 9 JUNE—Second Reading of the Consumer Credit Bill.

FRIDAY 10 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week after will include:

MONDAY 13 JUNE—Consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that there will be a debate on the national service framework for coronary heart disease in Westminster Hall on Thursday 9 June.

I am sure that all Members will wish to join me in warmly congratulating Liverpool football club on winning the European cup last night in Istanbul—part of a series of victories for teams in red this month.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the Leader of the House. I am sure all of us on the Opposition Benches will echo the words of congratulation to Liverpool. As a Manchester United supporter, I am, none the less, delighted to see the team in red from the other side of the north-west doing well on this particular occasion. My congratulations go to them.

May I also congratulate Labour Members on actually having remembered to turn up today? I remind those who are not so familiar with business questions that they do not just have to sit there listening to Opposition Members; they are allowed to ask questions as well. We look forward to hearing from them this week.

Last week, I asked the Leader of the House about the timetable for the establishment of Select Committees and Select Committee Chairmen appointments. Since then, there have been rumours around the House that the Government will try to do, once again, what they did in the last Parliament, which is to try to ensure that they do not have any troublemakers in the chairmanships of Select Committees. He will remember what happened the last time the Government tried to do that. Will he give the House a clear undertaking that this is not about to happen again?

Has the Leader of the House had a chance to read early-day motion 228?

[That this House commends the campaign to protect rural England for its work in highlighting the 50th year of the green belt and in defending green spaces; notes the risk that the Government's policies on development in the South East, East Anglia and in other regions will lead to the disappearance of many parts of rural England; and calls for an urgent review of the environmental impact of those policies to guarantee the green belt for the next 50 years.]

The early-day motion marks the 50th anniversary of the green belt and commends the Campaign to Protect Rural England for its work in highlighting the importance of the green belt. Ministers often declare their support for the green belt, but the CPRE says that planning authorities are being given mixed messages from the Government about green belt protection. Can we have an early debate on the green belt, and can the Government give us assurances that they will protect the existing green belt during the lifetime of this Parliament?

Will the Leader of the House also hold a debate in Government time on plans to quadruple inspection costs for the network of charitable multiple sclerosis therapy centres? These organisations do extremely valuable work, and are funded voluntarily. Is he happy that his colleagues now appear to be asking people to shake tins outside Sainsbury's on a Saturday to raise funds for the Government?

Finally, does the Leader of the House remember writing a letter to *The Guardian* back in 1996 attacking the then Government for not allowing enough time to debate important issues in the House? Can I take it that, given his concern at that time, he will now ensure that the House has much more time to debate important issues and that he will not be resorting to the guillotine in the way that his two predecessors did on so many occasions?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman did not intend to describe any right hon. or hon. Member as a troublemaker—that expression certainly would never cross my lips. It is important that we get Select Committees established before the summer recess, as I indicated last week, and it is also important of course that we respect the democratic traditions of the parties represented in the House as they go through their appropriate procedures to nominate Committee members. That process is under way, certainly on this side of the House.

The Government attach enormous importance to the green belt. I have not read the detail of early-day motion 228, but I shall do so in due course. There is obviously the possibility of an early debate on the green belt in Opposition time given that we are yet to learn from the official Opposition the subject matter of the Opposition day debate during the week after next. I am sure that the green belt would be an appropriate subject for that occasion.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of the voluntary sector and the work that it does to raise funds for a wide variety of causes, but I simply do not accept that we are asking any voluntary organisation to do the work that the Government properly should.

The hon. Gentleman has obviously done his research well on my extensive correspondence with *The Guardian* when I was in opposition. I made it clear last week that there are occasions when Members of Parliament in opposition take a slightly different view from that which they take in government. I had experience of that when I was in opposition and listened to many people in

government who now seem to take a different view on important issues, such as the allocation of parliamentary time. I hope that he will appreciate that it is important not only that there is sufficient time for the scrutiny of legislation, but that we are able to cover as many subjects as hon. Members wish to raise.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can my right hon. Friend give the House an indication of how quickly we can vote on smoking in public places, which affects many people in this country and, even more importantly, workers' health? I have always approached the issue from the protection of workers' health angle. I do not like bans, but do not believe that people who work in bars, cafés, restaurants and clubs should be putting their health at risk. The sooner we can have a debate and vote on the matter in the House, the better.

Mr. Hoon: The Government agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of the matter, especially as far as it affects those who work in places where they might be affected by other people's smoke, and that was why we included a Bill to deal with the issue in the Queen's Speech. I am thus confident that the House will have the opportunity to debate the matter during this parliamentary Session.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Now that the Leader of the House has had a week to think about it, has he thought of a reply to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) last week? Does he have any plans to act on the recommendations of the Modernisation Committee to establish a business management committee so that we can have proper debate on the plethora of Bills that come forward rather than having that truncated by guillotine?

Is the Leader of the House aware that there is a debate in another place today that has been secured by a Labour peer to "call attention to the workings of the British electoral system in the 2005 general election"? Might it be time for this elected House to consider that matter and especially to debate a voting system that allows a Government to be elected with a substantial majority by significantly less than 25 per cent. of the country's population, and also the avoidable loss of integrity of the voting system due to the postal voting system?

When we adjourn in July for a quarter of the year there will be no effective scrutiny of the Government in this place. We know we will be unable to use the Chamber during that period, so if the Government should engage in some adventure, are there contingency plans in place so that the House can reassemble and debate matters?

May we have a debate in Government time about the workings of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and especially the role of the Deputy Prime Minister, as many of his functions seem to have been removed? I am indebted to the No. 10 website for telling us:

"He will have a formal role in promoting the interests of the North across Government."

Can the Leader of the House tell us who has a formal role in promoting the interests of the west country, the east midlands, the west midlands, East Anglia and the south across government?

Mr. Hoon: As ever, a long list from the Liberal Democrats. I shall do my best to deal with each and every item on it—perhaps not this week, but in due course. The House established the Modernisation Committee in the previous Parliament and, although this is a matter for the House, I would strongly support any initiative to re-establish it. It seems to me that although valuable work has been done, further work is needed. That will include a consideration of many aspects of the management of business.

As far as electoral reform is concerned, I met yesterday with representatives of the Electoral Reform Society and we discussed aspects of their proposals. Whenever the hon. Gentleman talks about integrity and principle, I am unaccountably struck by the fact that the Liberal Democrats always support a particular form of electoral representation in the electoral system that just happens to favour them. That must be a coincidence.

I recognise that there are something like five different electoral systems in operation in the United Kingdom. That is being considered in a review by officials in the Department for Constitutional Affairs. It is important that the House allows that review to continue so that we examine properly the practical effect of those systems, rather than simply reaching for the system that favours one political party in the process. I know that the Liberal Democrats would not dream of doing that. That would be a terrible accusation, and I do not make it.

There are contingency plans in the event of the House having to be recalled when the Chamber is not otherwise available. I am certain that when it comes to Question Time for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, he will demonstrate the wide range of responsibilities that he enjoys. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will be able to ask him about them.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that at the beginning of the last Parliament, a determined effort was made to get the Select Committees up and running very fast, although there were one or two minor frissons. He knows that there are no troublemakers in new Labour, so he should have no difficulty in speeding up the process. If that does not happen, the Prime Minister's excellent innovation in appearing before the Liaison Committee on a regular basis may lose its impetus and people may suspect—quite wrongly—that the Government are trying to put off the next meeting of the Chairman and the Prime Minister.

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that my hon. Friend would be much better described as a minor frisson than as a troublemaker. I recognise the importance of getting the Select Committees re-established. As Leader of the House, I want that to happen as quickly as possible. However, I repeat that it is a matter for the democratic processes of the political parties represented in the House. The Labour party has set in motion its process. I hope that other parties do the same.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): Given that this year commemorates the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar—a battle won by a son of Norfolk—what plans do the Government have to celebrate that great event in the House and across the country, to fly the flag for Norfolk and for England?

Mr. Hoon: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, extensive plans are emanating from the Ministry of Defence—a matter on which I have a passing acquaintance. I am sure that he and all other right hon. and hon. Members will appreciate the efforts that will go into providing an extensive fleet review, which will take place quite soon to commemorate the battle of Trafalgar. I look forward to any suggestions from hon. Members as to how the House may suitably commemorate the event. I am delighted to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that one of the largest ships in the fleet review will be provided by France.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): The Government pride themselves on the amount of scrutiny to which the Prime Minister and Ministers submit themselves on European matters, but that relies on the Liaison Committee, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) referred, and the Select Committees being up and running. Is it not paradoxical that during the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union, there appear to be no plans to provide for scrutiny by this place, for additional statements and for the submission of the Prime Minister to examination on the presidency? Pending the setting up of the Select Committees, which should be done with expedition, may I invite the Leader of the House to consider extraordinary innovative arrangements, whereby the Ministers principally concerned, including the Prime Minister, make themselves available, in public, to Members of the House of Commons for probing and scrutiny in the Committee Room?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend consistently raises questions of scrutiny, and quite rightly; I do not object to his observations. I have a large document sitting on my desk, as yet unread, about the way in which this House might improve its scrutiny of European affairs. It is important that the House has the opportunity of asking appropriate Ministers for their observations about the development of the UK presidency. I am sure that my hon. Friend and other right hon. and hon. Members will use the statements that I am sure Ministers will make, as well as Question Time, to ensure that the House is fully informed of the excellent progress I anticipate being made during the UK presidency.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): The Leader of the House will agree that with the continued suspension of devolution in Northern Ireland and with the Northern Ireland Assembly unable to sit, it would be sensible and right to subject direct rule Ministers in Northern Ireland to as much accountability as possible. To that end, would it not be right that during this Parliament, for the first time, the Northern Ireland Grand Committee be allowed to meet in Belfast in the same way as the Scottish and Welsh Grand Committees meet in their countries? Would not that make the Committee's workings, and Members of this House from Northern Ireland, more relevant to the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable suggestion. It is important that those Ministers appointed to deal with affairs in Northern Ireland for the moment should be available to this House and to its Committees. I will look carefully at his suggestion.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time to organise a debate on the excellent role that the voluntary sector can play in the provision of public services in a non-bureaucratic and flexible way? Such a debate would allow me to commend the services provided by more than 30 volunteers at the Hemsworth and South Elmsall Home Start, providing services to more than 320 families in 19 villages in my constituency, and would allow me to oppose the proposals made by some consultants that would see the end of that excellent service.

Mr. Hoon: One of the advantages of the general election campaign was that I was able to travel the country where I saw the excellent work done by Home Start and its volunteers right across the country. I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in commending the excellent work of Home Start in west Yorkshire.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Will the Leader of the House find time to look at the provision of maternity care throughout the country and, in particular, premature baby cots? Since the closure of the maternity unit at Hemel Hempstead hospital, mothers and babies that desperately need these facilities have been sent as far as Nottingham and Yarmouth. I should have thought that mothers and babies in Nottingham and Yarmouth might need those cots themselves, and we should have cots back in Hemel Hempstead.

Mr. Hoon: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Floor of the House. I know that, in his previous position, he was assiduous in assisting Conservative Front Benchers in asking me questions indirectly. I welcome his opportunity to do so directly, at least on a very different subject from that which engaged us both in the last Parliament. In relation to the important subject that he raised, I will ensure that Health Ministers are made aware of it and give him an answer.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley) (Lab): A debate has broken out all over the country about respect, but can that debate be extended to this House? If so, we could discuss how our young people are engaged in our communities and look not just at what they do badly, but at what they do well. For example, young people in my constituency take part in many of the activities that are the glue of the community. They attend fetes and galas, and share memories with war veterans, ex-mill workers and those who have been engaged in the activities that make our community different. We need an opportunity to say what is good about young people as well as what is bad.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend puts her case extremely well and I would not disagree with her observations. It is

important that this issue is recognised as part of every debate that we have in the House, as we seek to find ways in which to ensure that the significant investment that the Government have put into public services is made to work effectively by harnessing the good will of the population and ensuring that people recognise their responsibility to our society.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am sure, Mr. Speaker, that the Leader of the House was hanging on your every word when you reminded us that the voice of the minority parties had to be heard in the House. When the personnel of the Select Committees is being determined, will the Leader of the House ensure that we are not overlooked and that we are in fact over-represented to ensure that that minority voice is heard?

Mr. Hoon: It has never been my habit to overlook the hon. Gentleman's contributions.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 165?

[That this House believes that the London Eye has been instrumental in regenerating London's South Bank; congratulates the London Eye Company and its staff on becoming the UK's most popular attraction; believes that South Bank Centre (SBC)'s demands for a massive increase in rent is an outrage and that the eviction notice served on the London Eye is against the public interest and should be withdrawn immediately; and calls on the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to use her influence to persuade SBC to withdraw its threat of eviction and accept an appropriate level of rent.]

This is a cross-party motion supporting the London Eye in its attempt to stay on the south bank opposite the House of Commons. If it is really threatened, we should have a debate on the matter. More importantly, will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to step in, and to step on Lord Hollick, who, as someone appointed by the Secretary of State, is behaving in an appalling way?

Mr. Hoon: I cannot entirely agree with my hon. Friend's final suggestion, but I recognise the importance of this subject not only to London Members but to all those whose constituents regularly visit the London Eye. This is a sensitive commercial matter, and we obviously hope that it can be resolved satisfactorily in the interest of preserving a tourist attraction for the people of London and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): Can we have an urgent debate on the situation at MG Rover? I have raised this issue before, and there is considerable concern about the pensions scheme at the company. I believe that the pensions are safe under the pension protection plan and, in fairness, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has also said that, but only to the press and not in the House. I tabled a question to the Secretary of State on this issue on the first day that we came back, to ask whether we could have a statement on the application of the pension protection plan. A response in *Hansard* would have reassured the workers that the plan would apply to their pensions, but I have yet to receive an answer. That is completely unacceptable. There are many questions that need to be answered. Did the directors take money out of the company that belonged to it? Should that money now be in the pension scheme, if the Rover directors took money to which they were not entitled? If the pension protection plan is to apply, other people's pensions will have to be levied in order to pay the shortfall at Rover, which is clearly unfair to those other people. May we have an urgent debate in the House on this matter, to ensure that there is no Government cover-up and that we all know the full facts?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Lady is an experienced Member of the House, and I am sure that she will find ways in which to make an even longer speech on this important question in future. The position of pensioners from MG Rover is a matter of great concern. They are currently being paid their pensions, and it is important that that should go on. I can tell the hon. Lady that detailed discussions are under way to ensure that that happens.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that biometrics experts have cast doubt on the practicalities of introducing identity cards. Even with 99 per cent. accuracy, for every 100 scans there will be one false match. If that is scaled up to apply to a population of 50 million, that would mean that one person's scan would match another 500,000. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be reasonable for the House to have information on the Government's technological analysis of the gathering, storage and retrieval of biometric data, and on their cost-benefit analysis of introducing an ID card scheme? Will he ensure that that information is available to hon. Members before the identity cards Bill has its Second Reading? If it is not readily available, why are the Government introducing the Bill now?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend will know that there are a number of experts in this field, and that they do not always agree on the precise nature of the tests that are conducted. I am sure that she would not quote from a particular expert who, by coincidence, just happened to agree with her point of view. I can tell the House, however, that hon. Members will have the opportunity to debate these matters in full and in detail very soon.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time for the House to debate the Attorney-General's advice to the Prime Minister of 7 March 2003 on the legality of the war in Iraq? In particular, will he make room for a debate on paragraphs 34 and 35 of that advice? Paragraph 34 states that Ministers are open to prosecution for the common law crime of international aggression. On such legal actions, paragraph 35 states:

"We cannot be certain that they would not succeed."

Surely this is a matter of grave importance for the House and for the Ministers concerned.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is certainly right; this is a matter of grave importance to me. As a distinguished academic lawyer, he will have studied carefully the Attorney-General's opinion, and he is no doubt preparing an article on the subject for some learned academic journal as we speak. However, I would refer him, for the moment at any rate, to the

[Mr. Hoon]

Attorney-General's interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, which adds further interesting information on the subject.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): In regard to the answer that my right hon. Friend gave to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) earlier, he will obviously accept that the election on 5 May showed not only resounding support for the continuation of a Labour Government for a record third term but the rejection of a Tory Government and the belief that a Liberal Government would not be credible. Does my right hon. Friend also accept, however, that the pendulum did not swing evenly in that election, and that it is perhaps time to consider whether our electoral system accurately reflects all the different currents within the population? Such work was carried out by the Jenkins commission during the first term of the Labour Government, and it came up with an excellent alternative vote system. However, the proposal was then ruined by trying to make it into a proportional system that would have introduced first-class and second-class MPs and taken away the constituency link from many of them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the alternative vote meets many of the criteria in regard to people's concerns about the existing system, and that, when we debate these issues over the next few months, the House should be part of that debate?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his observations. As I said earlier, we now have the benefit of five different systems operating in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the review by officials in the Department for Constitutional Affairs is to examine those systems in practice, to see what effect they have. It is important that the House give those officials that opportunity. Obviously, hon. Members will want to discuss their findings in greater detail once the review is completed.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): After the Chancellor of the Exchequer inadvertently misquoted my election address, for which he apologised—at least, I think he apologised from behind the Chair; I was not too sure what he was saying—can we have an urgent debate of at least seven hours to discuss the unfairness of funding for schools in Staffordshire? Is the Leader of the House aware that, in Slough, there is an allocation of £3,736 per pupil, and in Tower Hamlets, the figure is £5,051? However, the figure in Staffordshire is £3,021 per pupil. It is not that we want more overall funding; we want fair funding.

Mr. Hoon: I am well aware of the debate that the hon. Gentleman mentions. I receive similar representations from county councillors in Nottinghamshire, so I am aware of the concern about differential funding across the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills is also considering the matter, which is obviously something that we must get right in the future.

Helen Southworth (Warrington, South) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the excellent work carried out by the Talk, Don't Walk project in Warrington, which helps vulnerable young people to find a better alternative to solving their problems than running away from home? He would be very welcome to come and see it for himself, but I particularly hope that he will institute a debate on support and protection for young runaways.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has raised an important subject, and I know that it is one in which she has taken a considerable interest on behalf of her constituents. I commend the project and I commend her efforts.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) (LD): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate to put right a great injustice brought about by the previous Conservative Government when they privatised water? That privatisation has led in the south-west to 3 per cent. of the population paying for cleaning up 30 per cent. of the country's beaches. The population in the south-west are still paying the highest water charges in the country and facing further charges far in excess of the rate of inflation. Can we have a debate on this, so that this injustice can be put right?

Mr. Hoon: One of the reasons for the tremendous costs since 1997 is the appalling legacy of the lack of investment that we inherited at that time. There is no reason why the hon. Gentleman should not secure one of the many opportunities for debate that the House affords. If he is advocating a wholesale change of ownership, no doubt we will be filled in when the Liberal Democrats introduce plans to spend still further huge amounts of taxpayers' money.

Meg Hillier (Hackney, South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the massive investment, particularly through the London schools challenge, in education in Hackney, South and Shoreditch. I particularly support the 14 to 19 agenda, but I would be grateful if he could schedule time for a debate on adult education. Hackney has many hard-working families with adults who access skills training to boost their family's economy and the wider economy, yet the funding mechanism, particularly in east London, does not favour that. I would be glad of the chance to debate the issue.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point about a very important subject. I know that the Department for Education and Skills gives it priority, and I am sure that she will find an opportunity to raise that vital question in one of the many Adjournment debates available to Members of the House.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford) (Con): As the Prime Minister has rather refreshingly and surprisingly said that one lesson he has learned in recent weeks is that he should listen more, would the Leader of the House like to assist him by providing a debate in this Chamber about house building in the south-east and in areas such as my own of Chelmsford? The Prime Minister can then hear the anger of my constituents, of my right hon. and hon. Friends, and of his own hon. Friends, about the levels of house building imposed by diktat on greenfield sites because there are not enough brownfield sites around London and beyond and the infrastructure does not exist

to sustain communities. The Environmental Audit Committee has strongly criticised the Government for proceeding without paying attention to anyone's views.

Mr. Hoon: The Government have a strong commitment to providing affordable housing for the many people who want to own their own homes. I recognise that there are significant planning issues, and we have made it clear that before engaging in large-scale construction of new housing, it is important that the appropriate infrastructure is in place. That is in stark contrast to the way in which the previous Conservative Government approached those important issues.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): The Leader of the House recognised the importance of the game of professional football when he congratulated Liverpool on its win in Istanbul last night. As a Manchester United supporter, I must regretfully join him in those congratulations. There are serious issues about the ownership and control of football, as evidenced by the takeover of Manchester United, in which I have a moderate interest as a very tiny shareholder. Another example is Wrexham, where the club owner took actions that were deemed unacceptable to the community of Wrexham. Those matters are of genuine community interest. Can we have an urgent debate about whether present company law is the relevant structure for ownership of something that brings so much pleasure to millions of people in this country?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises that not all football clubs are publicly quoted companies. Some are, but some are not. It is important that their ownership is considered alongside the relevant rules for other companies. At the same time, I recognise the genuine concern in particular communities about the nature of ownership and control. If my hon. Friend would like to raise those matters with me in writing, I shall ensure that they are directed to the appropriate Government Department.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): The Leader of the House will be aware of the good work done by many charities and heritage organisations up and down the country that is being put at risk by the Chancellor's proposals to remove gift aid benefits from day memberships. Will he allow time for a debate in the House to discuss that as a matter of urgency?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a charities Bill in the Queen's Speech programme. I am sure that he will have the opportunity to make that point and, indeed, to table appropriate amendments to the Bill if necessary.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): May I also raise the issue of smoking in public places? Is my right hon. Friend aware that yesterday there was a cross-party vote in the Welsh Assembly in favour of introducing a ban on smoking in all enclosed workplaces and public places, with a few exceptions such as prisons and nursing homes, following the report of the cross-party working group ably chaired by Val Lloyd, the Assembly Member for Swansea East? I urge my right hon. Friend to introduce a public health Bill in England as soon as possible. Can he assure me that such a Bill will provide an opportunity for the Welsh Assembly to carry out the report's recommendations?

Mr. Hoon: I am aware of the vote, and I recognise, as I told the House earlier, that there is great concern among right hon. and hon. Members about the subject. I can, however, give my hon. Friend the assurance that she is seeking and confirm that such a Bill will be introduced as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker: Mr. Fabricant. I am sorry, Mr. Bercow.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not always wear what he does.

Given the savage abuse of human rights perpetrated by the ruling military junta in Burma, the continued incarceration of political prisoners and the detention without democratic trial of Aung San Suu Kyi, whose 60th birthday takes place next month, does the Leader of the House agree that it is time that the Government staged the first ever debate on the Floor of the House on the subject of Burma? That would give them the opportunity to show how, through the use of moral pressure on the one hand and action for concerted sanctions on the other, we can hasten the day when the long-suffering people of Burma enjoy the freedom and democracy that we have long enjoyed and which they have too long been denied?

Mr. Hoon: I am aware from previous ministerial responsibilities of the enormous amount of work done by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to put pressure on the Burmese regime to recognise human rights and take appropriate steps to restore Burma as a respectable member of the international community. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his continuing efforts as well.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Following on from the initial remarks by the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), nor do I.

I commend the research paper on the 2005 general election produced by the House of Commons Library—a must for political anoraks, including all Members of Parliament. It is important that we have a debate on postal voting, which has provided an enormous opportunity for many people to exercise their democratic right. A small minority of cases, however, have generated a great deal of press coverage. We should have a debate as soon as possible so that we can restore confidence in a system that worked in the vast majority of constituencies up and down the country.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has raised an important matter, which the Government are considering closely with the Electoral Commission. The commission has made certain observations about the use of postal voting, but I agree with my hon. Friend that postal voting has been enormously important in giving people many more opportunities to vote. At the same time, however, we must ensure that they vote in a way that is safe and secure and does not allow any abuse of our democratic system.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Points of Order

12.9 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful to you for granting me the opportunity to raise this matter. In Treasury questions, the Chancellor referred to press releases issued by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and myself. My hon. Friend has already said that he was misquoted. I, too, was misquoted. My election manifesto says:

"In the Cotswolds we have seen a huge erosion in our way of life, with farmers, country sports, small and special schools, post offices, pharmacies all under threat and our young people cannot afford . . . housing."

That is a very long way from calling for more money for farmers. In the gentlest possible way, may I suggest that if one hon. Member or right hon. Member, however important he is, quotes another Member, he ought to do so correctly?

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I want to clarify a point of order that I tried to make, however badly, on Tuesday morning, about my inability and that of many of my colleagues to hear the Minister's wind-up speech in the Queen's Speech education debate. It was a common complaint that we could not hear that speech because of the organised noise from the Opposition. In my view, that is a point of order, because anything that stops a Member being heard in the Chamber surely cannot be tolerated by the Chair.

Mr. Speaker: I thought that the hon. Gentleman raised that matter yesterday. What he did was draw in the question of the change of hours, which I told him was not a point of order. I reiterate that I am strong in reminding Members not to enter into private conversation. If there is any orchestrated attempt to drown out any Member, from any part of the House, I will take the appropriate action—

Mr. Sheerman *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not wish to pursue the matter, but I am telling the hon. Gentleman that if there is such an orchestrated attempt, I will deal with it. Does he wish to pursue the matter?

Mr. Sheerman: Only in relation to one small element. Mr. Speaker, you and I both have daughters, and if one has daughters, one is perhaps even more pro women's rights than if one does not. This technique is used more against women Members of the House than against men—

Mr. Speaker: Order. All Members are treated equally in the House, regardless of their gender.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am genuinely surprised by the hon. Gentleman's insistence on this point. I was here for that debate, and I was straining to hear the Secretary of State for Education. I genuinely wondered whether the microphone was operating properly. I have seen occasions on which Ministers, or shadow Ministers, have been shouted down from either side of the House. This was not one of those occasions.

Mr. Speaker: All that I would do is to ask the hon. Gentlemen not to keep going back to this point. I make the case that no one will be either shouted down or talked down in that manner. I have taken a point of order from the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) that there are technical difficulties with the microphones. I have asked the officials to take the opportunity during the recess to deal with the matter.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. My hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) are aggrieved that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has quoted, apparently inaccurately, from their election addresses. I seek your guidance, Mr. Speaker, because I am concerned that the Chancellor is behaving in a thoroughly unequal and discriminatory fashion. I feel sorely let down and missed out, because he has not quoted from my election address, which is a model of one-nation conservatism, and I commend it to him.

Mr. Speaker: And he has not quoted anything from my election address, which was a very good election address.

Adjournment (Whitsun)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Tony Cunningham.]*

12.13 pm

Mr. Angus MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I hope that hon. Members will be patient and kind for a few moments while I quote from the language of Eden:

"A nich labhairt san a tha e a toirt toileachas dhomhsa an diugh m'oraid a thoiseachadh ann an cainnt m'oige, caint a thug m'athair dhomh is san tha mi a nis fior thaingeil gu robh e daigeann a deanamh cinnteach gum biodh canan mo sgire agam.

Si Gaidhlig an cainnt Cheilteach a rinn Alba na dhuthaich air a bheil sinn eolach an diugh. Se na Gaidheil a tha againn oirnn fheinn ach chuir na Romanaich Scotti oirnn mar a chuir na Iriquois 'Eskimo' air na h-Inuit.

Thug Gaidhlig is da channanas iomadh buanachd dhomhsa. Tha i a deanamh ceangal ri mo charaidean bhon Chumrigh—ged nach tuig an da chainnt Cheilteach a cheile agus tha i a'cuimhneach dbuinn ceangalaichean ri Eilean Mhanain is ri Eirinn."

I thank hon. Members.

In translation, it gives me great pleasure to begin my speech in Gaelic, the language taught to me by my father, and I am grateful for his determination, and my mother's support. Gaelic is the language that made Scotland a distinct entity. We Gaelic speakers call ourselves the Gaels, and have done so throughout history. The Romans called us the Scotti, however, in the same way that the Iroquois named the Inuit Eskimos. Gaelic is now spoken by only about 60,000 people in Scotland and I am glad to be one of them. Being bilingual has given me many benefits, not least an empathy with the Welsh, although the two Celtic languages relate to each other in the same way as the Germanic languages of English and German. My sort of Gaelic, however, is closely related to that of the Isle of Man and Ireland.

I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Calum MacDonald, whom Labour Members in particular remember fondly, I am sure. Calum, a highland gentleman and a very nice man, was most gracious after my election, and I thank him for that.

Na h-Eileanan an Iar stretches for 200 miles. Last week, as I flew from south to north, I experienced three different types of weather. Clearly, the new BBC weather forecast, as every fisherman told me at the fishing exhibition in Glasgow last weekend, is totally inadequate for our needs. I am pleased to say that the BBC sent me a letter, which I received yesterday, indicating a change of heart on the tilt of the map, which had rendered Scotland, 40 per cent. of the land mass of the UK, down to 10 per cent. of the screen area. I welcome the BBC's responsiveness to the needs of my many constituents. The BBC now needs to ensure that we have wind speeds, with directions and isobar charts, on all bulletins. I would like to thank other Members, from many parties, who signed my early-day motion calling on the BBC to think again.

Lewis is the biggest and most populated of the islands, with almost 20,000 people. Fish farming is now the largest employer, although Harris tweed remains an important industry. Travelling south, one reaches Harris, which is currently suffering the loss of around 70 jobs from the closure of the salmon processing plant on Scalpaigh—a problem that, in per capita terms, is far worse for the area than the closure of the MG Rover plant is for the midlands.

Off the west coast of Harris is Taransay, where, as many Members might remember, the television programme "Castaway" was filmed. Over the sound of Harris is Berneray, where the illustrious Prince Charles once spent a spring gainfully employed planting potatoes. Berneray is linked by causeway to North Uist, which in turn is linked to Benbecula, South Uist and on to Eriskay. There has been concern throughout Uist that the linking of the islands with fixed links, leaving no gap for tidal flow, exacerbated the effects of the storms on 11 January, causing the sea to bank on the west coast of Uist, with devastating effects on Iochdar in South Uist and the tragic loss of five people—three generations of the same family. The effects of causeways should therefore now be examined to see whether they interact with the tides and storm surges.

To get home to Barra from Uist, I can take the second ferry that links the constituency. The ferry leaves from Eriskay beside the silvery white beach where Bonnie Prince Charlie started his epic and, sadly, failed adventure. On Barra is the famous cockle strand, the Traigh Mhor, which in famine times 150 years ago fed many hundreds. The beach is now Barra's airport, and when one is there, places such as London or Glasgow can feel quite remote, as one can only get to them at low tide. Transportation, and its associated costs, is a pressing problem for the islands and one of the main reasons for depopulation. Sadly, the finest scenery in the UK cannot retain people on its own. In the past 10 years, my constituency has lost 11 per cent. of its population—more than any other in the House, I believe. That is caused not by geography, but by politics. Ireland is gaining population. Iceland's population grew over the 20th century, as did Norway's. The Faroe Islands trebled its population in the 20th century. Scotland generally suffers from not being an independent country; our Parliament does not even have the powers of the Isle of Man.

In the short term, beyond a constitutional change, there is a pressing need for road equivalent tariff to lower our ferry fares and give our islands the same chance, opportunities and success as those in western Norway. For our air services, we need public service orders on the Benbecula and Stornoway routes to complement the Barra route, to make fares more affordable to the general public.

A former governor of the Bank of England, Eddie George, once said that unemployment in the north was a price worth paying for economic stability in the south. As Ireland to the west has shown, however, it is possible to benefit what were once considered to be the political and economic fringes, as long as we are not all stuck with the "one size fits all" economic politics of the sterling zone. Irish independence has been an economic win-win situation for both the United Kingdom and Ireland, as has Norway's independence for Norway and Sweden.

The sentiments of the former governor of the Bank of England make me proud as Punch to be a member of the Scottish National party and to be here today—although that is tempered by the fact that on my first day I was taken to Westminster Hall and reminded of the fate of an earlier Scottish nationalist in these parts, William

[Mr. Angus MacNeil]

Wallace, who was hanged, drawn and quartered for his politics 700 years ago this August. I am not sure that I can match that courage; in fact, I am certain that I cannot—just in case some Members are getting ideas.

In 1900, there were about 50 independent nations on earth. With the decline in imperialism, there are now about 200. I say to my fellow Scots that independence and progress travelled hand in glove during the 20th century, and will continue to do so.

There is much more that I could have said about my constituency, my Labour predecessor and the need for Scotland to choose independence. Let me end, however, by pointing out that my majority at the election was 1441. It is not the first time that that number has troubled some in the House, and I wonder whether it will be the last.

12.21 pm

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil). This is my first opportunity to mention the name of his constituency in the new Parliament. My surname may be McIsaac, but the McIsaacs—pronounced differently—originally hailed from the isle of Eriskay. While I may not share the hon. Gentleman's Scottish Nationalist politics, I am sure that we will continue to share a love of the islands of the west of Scotland. I pay tribute to his maiden speech, which highlighted problems that I know exist in the islands, and I hope that he does well in the House.

Being called today made me cast my mind back to my own maiden speech, which seems a long time ago. On that day I focused on education, and particularly on primary school class sizes, a subject to which I want to return today.

During the general election campaign, North East Lincolnshire council, which covers the constituencies of Cleethorpes and Great Grimsby, announced controversial school closures. I am inclined to go for the cock-up rather than the conspiracy theory of history, but many residents of Grimsby and Cleethorpes sense a very fishy aroma wafting from Grimsby town hall. The Liberal Democrat leader of the council stood against my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) at the election, and two of my opponents were Liberal Democrat and Conservative cabinet members. Although I do not think that that was deliberate, many people in the area do.

Having announced the closures in the middle of the election campaign, the council has now given a closing date of 31 May for comments. I think that that is far too short a period for parents worried about their children's education to come up with alternatives to closure. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, will talk to education Ministers to establish whether a properly defined time limit for this part of the consultation is possible. But regardless of the time limit, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and I believe that the closures are entirely unjustified. They do not conform to Government guidelines, and I think that education Ministers should reiterate to councils that it is not good practice to start eliminating surplus places by closing schools that are successful and, in the case of some of those earmarked for closure, over-subscribed.

Another reason why the proposed closures are completely wrong is the fact that the information used by the council is out of date. Its net capacity figures relate to 2002 or thereabouts. Since then, many of the schools in question—not just those threatened with closure, but some that are threatened with amalgamation or a reduction in the number of classrooms—have taken steps to deal with the problem of surplus places. The paper produced by the council does not recognise that. The fact that the figures are out of date and wrong must be addressed as a matter of urgency before any decision is made to close a school.

The schools themselves are challenging the figures. One of them, Bursar primary school in Cleethorpes, is close to my home. The council says that it has capacity for 243 admissions, but its limit is actually 210, and there are currently 198 children on its roll. That could not be described as an excessive number of surplus places. Elliston infants school and Elliston junior school are also in Cleethorpes. One of those schools is above capacity and is one of the best-performing schools in the borough, yet it too is being earmarked for closure.

The council has come up with predictions of the size of the Grimsby and Cleethorpes population in 2009. It asserts that the population in the borough is declining and that the number of births is falling. It claims that there will be 400 or 500 fewer children each year. According to the Office for National Statistics, the number of live births in the area is increasing, and it predicts that the number of children of primary school age will also increase over the next few years. If the council proceeds with its plans, up to 2,000 primary school-age children may be without places because of its severe underestimate of future numbers.

I am deeply worried by the council's failure to announce alternatives to the closures. It simply announced in the press, in the middle of an election campaign, that schools would have to close, and told parents to come up with alternatives. Surely it would have been better practice to liaise with parents, with the schools involved, with head teachers and with unions in a co-operative way, with a view to identifying alternatives and to see what the schools themselves could suggest. Some of those earmarked for closure have no surplus places at all, and it is entirely wrong for over-capacity schools to be closed as a first step in the process of dealing with surplus places.

My hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House, with whom I have sparred on many occasions—I remember doing so on the issue of compensation for distant-water trawlermen when he was doing one of his earlier jobs—knows that once I get my teeth into an issue, I will not give up. I shall use every opportunity to harangue Front Benchers to establish whether there are any measures that they can take. I realise that it is for the council to come up with a solution to the problem of surplus school places, but I must seriously say to my hon. Friend that I do not believe the guidelines are clear enough to councils. Because they are unclear, councils such as North East Lincolnshire can come up with controversial proposals that worry parents and teachers and, in this case, create a great deal of uncertainty.

Now that the council says that schools will have to close, parents are wondering whether to risk sending their children to a particular school in September, and teachers are wondering whether they have to start looking for new jobs. Indeed, if there is a vacancy, how

will head teachers recruit staff if a school is going to be open for only three or four more months? The situation is a recipe for disaster. I tell the Minister again that we need far clearer rules on how to deal with surplus places, and I shall try to arrange a meeting with education Ministers to make that point.

Ultimately, the most serious political reason for my raising this matter before the 31 May deadline for comments is that, just as Governments are not allowed to make announcements during an election period, there is merit in local authorities not being allowed to do so, particularly in the middle of a general election campaign when people on the cabinet of that council are putting themselves forward for election, and when their main line during the election campaign in Grimsby and Cleethorpes was to blame the Government for the closures. We must seriously examine how certain councillors misuse their position to try to gain political advantage at the expense of school children and their parents.

12.32 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): This opportunity to raise matters of importance to our constituents recurs at regular intervals through the parliamentary calendar before the rather too regular Adjournments of the House. It is an important chance for Back-Bench Members to raise issues that they would not otherwise be able to raise properly and in order during discussions on legislation or, indeed, on the rare Government debates on matters of interest. Members present are clearly aware of the value of the exercise, not least those seeking to make their maiden speeches—this is yet another opportunity to do so after the Queen's Speech. However, all Members should be aware that this a chance to play a valuable role on behalf of their constituents and I find the empty Labour Benches astonishing. One can only assume that all is sweetness and light in every Labour constituency other than Cleethorpes.

It was a pleasure to hear an accomplished maiden speech by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil)—I hope that my pronunciation was reasonable. Those of us who served in previous Parliaments will still, I am afraid, think of the constituency as the Western Isles, because that is the limit of our linguistic prowess. I am jealous of the fact that he is bilingual. That is a great attribute and certainly opens doors. His accomplished speech on behalf of his constituents showed his deep knowledge of his constituency and I welcome him to the House. I suspect that he will form part of an exclusive ginger group of Members representing islands, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) and for St. Ives (Andrew George).

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): And Canvey Island.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman suggests that Canvey Island might be included in that group. Remote though it may be, I am not sure that it qualifies. The villages on the levels of Somerset revert to islands for only a few months every year and are considered to be inland most of the time. I welcome the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar to the House and congratulate him on his maiden speech.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) rightly used this opportunity to draw attention to a concern in her constituency. I have no idea of the rights and wrongs of the case that she mentioned. I hope that it will not be necessary for the Deputy Leader of the House to intervene in local authority matters, whichever authority that may be and whatever it may be engaged in. Having been a leader of a county council and chairman of a local education authority, I can say that there is never a right time to go about school reorganisations and there is never a way of presenting a case that does not cause a great deal of controversy locally. A wise local authority will listen carefully to the cases put on both sides and come up with the right solution to provide education for the people in its area.

If I may abuse my position slightly, I will first raise two matters of concern in my constituency. The first is a serious matter that I will have to return to repeatedly over the next few months: the future of the new Frome Victoria hospital. We have been waiting since 1998, when it was announced that a new hospital would be built for the town. We were promised that it would be built by 2000. Although it benefited from huge fundraising efforts in the town—£500,000 was raised towards the costs of the new hospital—the situation has becalmed because the private finance scheme to fund it appears not to have sufficient money to get it built.

That is a matter of huge concern in Frome. We have a green field where our new hospital should be. We have an excellent hospital, but it was built in Victorian times and cannot provide the necessary facilities for the people of Frome. The town has every right to expect something to be done to break the logjam and to ensure that the hospital is built. So often we hear glowing reports from hon. Members about the wonders of investment in the national health service and what that has provided for their constituencies, yet we in Frome still have a decaying Victorian hospital and an expectation that has so far not been met and we still lack a modern facility in Frome. I asked during the previous Parliament for Ministers to look into the problem and I will continue to do so in this Parliament.

My second point is on a rather happier note. Tomorrow, I shall visit St. Louis VC Roman Catholic junior school in my constituency, where the pupils have recorded a CD, songs from which they will sing to me, in support of the Make Poverty History campaign. The fact that children are engaged in that huge issue for our time, along with a large part of the population and the Government and Opposition parties, will, I hope, result in action when it comes to the summit and the British presidency of the G8 and the European Union. I hope that we will be able to make a difference on one of the most crucial issues facing the world, and that we can begin to change the world for the better by reducing the intense poverty that besets so many people in so many parts of the developing world.

My principal point is, as I mentioned during business questions, that I find it extraordinary that it is the unelected House that today is having a debate

> "To call attention to the workings of the British electoral system in the 2005 general election",

but that this elected House does not have the opportunity to say how it was for us, during an election that was widely felt to have fallen far short of what we

[Mr. Heath]

would hope of the democratic system in this country. I do not say that from a partisan point of view, because there are people of no political persuasion or many who feel exactly the same way. They feel that it cannot be right to have an electoral system in which a Government can be elected with a substantial majority in this House with just 22 per cent. of the electorate supporting them. It cannot be right for the Conservative party to gain more votes in England than the Labour party, yet have fewer seats. It cannot be right that Her Majesty's principal Opposition party in terms of numbers has no representation in any city outside London. That is an extraordinary position for our electoral system to be in.

I am not arguing the case purely from the position of my own party, even though it is clearly disadvantaged by the current system. Rather, I argue that, if we want people to have confidence in our democracy, questions must be asked about the present position. At the very least, we should examine whether a system that has, I accept, done perfectly well for the country in previous centuries and decades is now adequate to the task of reinvigorating our democracy for the future.

My party has a clear line on its preferred system of voting. The Leader of the House argued that we wanted it purely on the basis of self-interest, but that is not the case. The alternative vote system mentioned earlier would be the best for us in respect of the number of seats that we would secure, but we happen to believe that it is not proportional so we do not accept, in principle, that it is the best solution.

We also understand the arguments that people often make about the important link between Members and their constituencies. I agree that it is a very important consideration and I would be loth to lose it. I continue to be unhappy with the system used to elect Members to the European Parliament—the closed list system, which effectively puts all the power to decide who represents a particular area in the hands of the party machinery.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and I am personally experiencing the frustration that follows from being a member of a party that won the popular vote in England, yet remains a long way behind in the number of seats. Does he agree with the strong rationale that the links between an individual working in a community and that community itself must be the bedrock of our democratic system? Does he accept that what he proposes inevitably means moving away from that link?

Mr. Heath: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's first point, as I have already said that the link between the Member and the community is important. I also recognise, however, that the 22,000-odd people—I use the term "odd" in the mathematical rather than the pejorative sense—who voted Conservative in the Somerton and Frome constituency at the last election have not elected anyone to represent them on the basis of the votes that they secured. There has long been trench warfare over seats in Somerset and roughly similar numbers voted Conservative in the previous election and the one before that. The trick that we need is something that unites the sense of community with a sense of fairness, which is what I believe the British public want.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful for the opportunity to press the hon. Gentleman on that. I gain the biggest buzz of all in my constituency when someone approaches me and says, "I could never vote for you; I could never vote Conservative; but I am really grateful for the job you are doing." I am sure that the hon. Gentleman must have experienced the same feeling and that he would accept that it is possible for every MP to do a good job for every single constituent, regardless of how they vote.

Mr. Heath: Absolutely. One of the greatest compliments that I was ever paid came from a teller in a blue rosette who stopped me at the polling station during the previous election—not this one—and shook me warmly by the hand. He said, "Mr. Heath, I am a Conservative, as you can see, but I want you to know that you are, in my opinion, the best Member of Parliament that we have ever had". I was grateful for that; it meant something to me—*[Interruption.]* Not everyone would say that, but this gentleman did. I nevertheless believe that there are electoral systems that unite the crucial principle of being connected to a community with fairness across the country.

I recognise that there are both strongly divided and partisan views and some non-partisan views, and that all are equally strongly held. Surely, however, we have a duty, as the elected House in this country, to examine the issue on behalf of the people out there who believe that the system is not working properly or who have simply walked away from the whole process, as evidenced by the degree of abstentionism in this country's elections. There are far too many who feel that democracy is just not delivering for them, which is a very dangerous thing.

To move on from the electoral system itself, I want to mention the integrity of the voting system and problems with postal voting. I share the view that postal voting is, in its place, a useful addition to the opportunities available to the public. There were experiments in my constituency with all-postal voting for district council elections. It had an interesting effect and marginally increased participation, although there were, equally, problems on the other side of the fence. The difficulties that we experienced were clearly identified in our debates on pilot systems for the European Parliament before the whole electoral process started. The Government's insouciance and indolence meant that the proper safeguards that should have been put in place were not put in place, even though the Electoral Commission had said that they were necessary. That is why so many people felt that the system was being abused.

It is surely critical to our electoral process that people feel that our system has integrity. We preach the lesson abroad all the time when we monitor elections in other countries, yet there are systems in this country that would never pass my scrutiny as a member of the parliamentary delegation to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. If I were monitoring an election abroad, and saw some of the abuses of electoral processes that have taken place in

this country, I would write a damning report. We must revisit those problems, together with the engagement of the general public and voting opportunities, as a matter of urgency. For example, we could reflect on the possibility of voting at weekends. It is common in many other countries and it may be right for us now in an age when everyone works through the week. As we all know, having knocked on many doors over recent weeks, it is rare to find anyone in on a weekday, yet it is a weekday on which we call an election. Does that make sense? I do not believe that it does.

Finally, we need to connect all those issues with constitutional reform. The Government must get to grips with the job that they have botched. They started to reform the upper Chamber, but have not completed it, yet such reform is integrally connected with what happens in this Chamber. It is not possible to define the form and functions of the revising Chamber until the primary Chamber can do its work of scrutiny effectively. I do not believe that it functions well at the moment. As a result of the application of guillotines and the refusal to allow enough time for important Bills on Report, far too much legislation passes through the House with only cursory examination. We should remember that Report is the only time when hon. Members on both sides of the House can raise important issues on the legislation of the day. Legislation can sometimes be critical to the life and liberty of their constituents, but if hon. Members do not have the opportunity even to speak to, intervene on or debate critical amendments, the House cannot be said to be doing the job that it is elected to do. Once again, I view that matter as critical to our electoral process.

Mr. MacNeil: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis of the first-past-the-post electoral system, which theoretically allows a party to win less than 51 per cent. of the vote in every seat yet win every seat in the country. However, I could not support a proposal to hold elections over a weekend, and especially on a Sunday, as that would cause many of my constituents difficulty.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and applaud him for intervening so soon after making his maiden speech. That shows great confidence. I understand the sensitivities in parts of Scotland and Wales—and, indeed, the west country—about holding an election on a Sunday. Similar problems arise in parts of London, Manchester the other cities about holding an election on a Saturday. However, a slightly prolonged voting period would allow people with deep religious convictions not to vote on a Sunday.

In conclusion, we must address the electoral question as a matter of urgency, and we must do so in this elected House. The country needs to begin a process of democratic renewal. If the word did not have such bad connotations, I would say democratic rearmament because we need a crusade to get the democratic system back on track. Those hon. Members who think that this discussion is academic or merely dreamed up by Hampstead liberals in their drawing rooms are wrong because it is not. I have set out what people around the country are thinking. They believe that the system no longer works, that this House is irrelevant, and that neither Government nor Opposition parties listen to them. If we accept that with equanimity, we do both House and country a grave disservice, as the alternative is an awful lot worse.

12.52 pm

Mr. Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) for putting me out of my misery. I have had a long and nervous wait on these Benches and I shall try not to bore the House to tears over the next 10 or 12 minutes, but it will be difficult to follow such oratory.

I have visited the Scottish isles, and regularly go to Islay and Jura. I know that they are in the south, but if the constituency of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil) is as beautiful, he is indeed a lucky man. I have said that I will try not to bore the House, but Conservative Members cannot yet be deselected for making a bad speech. For that, I am grateful.

I follow Dame Marion Roe as MP for Broxbourne. She was well known to the House as a wonderful woman who made a wonderful contribution to the work done here. Her curriculum vitae is three pages long, but merely reading that for 10 minutes would put me in great trouble, so I shall pick out the highlights. She was an Environment Minister when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, and was also Chair of both the Health Committee and the Administration Committee. She was also joint vice-chair of the 1922 committee, and I am sure that she would like to be here today in that role.

The most important thing, however, is that Dame Marion gave 22 years of fabulous service to the people of Broxbourne. She is much loved and admired—and much missed. I want to thank her for the great kindness that she showed me and my young family when I was selected to fight the seat. Her husband James Roe, who was by her side for all those years, also deserves my gratitude for his kindness.

I am sure that the House will be interested to hear that Broxbourne is wedged between Essex and London. It is ringed by the M25 and the A10, and I thought that I would break with tradition and give hon. Members a brief tour of my constituency.

Waltham Cross lies to the south. It has a thriving Italian community of 10,000 people, many of whom came from Sicily to work in our greenhouse industry. Indeed, the town is twinned with Sutera in Sicily. It is well known for having an Eleanor cross, raised by King Edward I in 1292. Thirteen of those wonderful crosses were made in memory of the King's dead wife, whose body he trundled around London for 13 days. I hope that he got to us early in his journey, as I imagine that, by day 12 or 13, people would have known that she was on her way at least two days before she arrived.

I turn now to the historic town of Cheshunt, home to Cedars park, at whose gates Charles I was proclaimed king. Unfortunately, the story goes downhill from there. Cedars park was razed to the ground in the civil war, and we all know that Charles I unfortunately had his head cut off. Subsequently, Richard Cromwell, the Lord Protector's son, retired to Cheshunt on his return from his travels, when a new king was in place.

Given the streak of republicanism in Cheshunt, I am surprised that Labour is not better entrenched there. I am glad that it is not, but I should like to take this

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opportunity to thank my Labour opponent in the election, Jamie Bolden. He is 23 years old, a remarkable young man and a great credit to those on the Labour Benches. I believe that he is a future leader of the Labour party, or a future Cabinet Minister. He fought a hard and clean campaign, and the good-natured running joke in the constituency is that his mum is very proud of him. However, she has every right to be.

We move now to Broxbourne, which straddles the New river. That wonderful river was built in 1650 to take water from the chalk downs into London. It is home to a wide range of wildlife, including kingfishers and herons, as well as enormous pike. I am a very keen fisherman, but the drawback is that one is not allowed to fish in the New river. When I come to the end of my time in Broxbourne—and it might be sooner than I think—I hope on my last day that I might be able to nip down to the river. Many young men and women in my constituency find time to hide under a bridge and try and catch fish. I shall join them, and I shall cheer them on.

Broxbourne is home to a wonderful school that has three stars. It is highly rated by Ofsted and—more importantly—by the children who attend it. Many of them go on to do great and fabulous things. Another school in my constituency, the John Warner school, has just been awarded a charter mark, and students at the Sheredes school this week opened a garden at an old people's home that they had spent their free time repairing and making look beautiful. They are to be lauded for that, as young people make a massive contribution to society. We need to praise them for that, and encourage more people to get involved.

I hope that the House is not too tired with this journey around my constituency, as it is time to get back in the car and visit the attractive market town of Hoddesdon. It has a beautiful town centre that I am afraid needs some work. It could be a fantastic facility for my constituency and the surrounding area. We need to reinvigorate and revitalise Hoddesdon town centre. I shall work with all my colleagues on the town council and in local groups to ensure that we get the right business to go there, and that the town becomes a place people want to visit and spend time in.

The international pharmaceutical company Merck Sharp and Dhome is located in Hoddesdon. It is a major employer in my constituency, and it is at the forefront of finding cures for today's diseases. Again, I look forward to working with the company to bring more investment to my constituency, as I do with Tesco, which also has its headquarters in my constituency.

Last, but not least, is the Cuffley and Northaw ward in the borough of Welwyn Hatfield. It is an extremely beautiful area of rolling countryside and little villages. It is a wonderful part of the green belt and many people from London come to enjoy that part of my constituency. I urge Labour Members to press the Deputy Prime Minister to do a little less building on our bit of the green belt, as the present proposals worry many people.

Despite the leafy picture that I have painted, Broxbourne is not all roses. There are significant pockets of poverty, and we have many of the problems that one equates with London. Despite the best efforts of our schools—we have wonderful head teachers—our young people simply do not do as well as others in more prosperous areas. I urge the Government to work with me and other interested parties to try to improve the performance of our young people and give them the life opportunities that I and so many other Members had. The amount of new build is putting increasing strain on our schools and hospitals. I have parents crying in my surgery because they cannot get their children into any of the schools of their choice, let alone their first choice.

To be a little controversial for a moment, I understand that for every £60 spent by the Government in the north of England, only £35 is spent in my constituency. I do not want to see an increase in tax—in fact, I would like to see taxes reduced—but the cake should be cut a little more fairly. My constituents need good public services, and they need good schools and chances to improve their lives.

I shall conclude with the three things that matter most to my constituents. The first is the protection of the green belt. The East of England regional assembly is a totally unaccountable body, but it is placing hundreds of thousands of houses in the area. My constituents are confused, because 250,000 houses in the north of England are being pulled down—houses that would cost £30,000 to renovate, but £117,000 to replace. I will work with all parties to bring planning back to local people and to make elected politicians accountable for it.

I shall not rehearse the problems that Chase Farm hospital faces. It is a wonderful place where many good people work and we are lucky to have them, but it is in desperate need of more funding. That funding was promised eight years ago, but it still has not arrived. My constituents deserve a first-class health service. After all, they are paying for it. The people who work at Chase Farm deserve to work in a state-of-the-art hospital. My fear is that, if we do not see more investment, we will lose many of those good people and the problems afflicting Chase Farm will only worsen. I would hate to see that happen.

The final issue is crime. We are told that Broxbourne has 84 police officers, one per 1,000 of the population, but there are lies, damn lies and statistics. What with shifts, weekends, holidays, training and sickness, that number is radically reduced. Indeed, on some evenings, there can be as few as eight police officers covering those 84,000 people, which is only one per 10,000. Police stations are shut and calls go unanswered. I have huge respect for the brave men and women who patrol our streets, but we need to give them more support. I cannot go on telling my constituents, as the Government would like me to do, that they have never had it so good, because the reality does not match the rhetoric. We need more policemen and more visible policing before my constituents lose confidence in the service.

This is a daunting place, but I take comfort from the fact that, in the last century, 3,000 Members of Parliament came before me and in the next century, if we still have a Parliament, 3,000 will come after me. Only a very few make a lasting contribution—Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee, Margaret Thatcher and, although it pains me to say it, the present Prime Minister, because he will be recorded in history. I have been awarded a tiny walk-on part and I am hugely grateful for that. I hope to be a courageous Member of Parliament who puts his country and constituency

before his personal career. Wherever I see unfairness or injustice, I hope to challenge them. Whether I am here for four years or 40 years, I hope that my constituents will say, "He did his best for us, and that is all that we could ask."

1.4 pm

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to make my maiden speech. It is a pleasure to do so immediately after my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker), who is a constituency neighbour. I know that he was concerned about making his first speech, and I congratulate him on a tremendous maiden speech which I thoroughly enjoyed.

My predecessor in Welwyn Hatfield was a Labour Member and a Minister in three different Departments. Although politically we did not agree on many issues, she did her job, despite facing a serious illness during her time in the House, and did it very well.

I have spent some time trying to become a Member of Parliament, standing for the first time in 1997. Unfortunately, I was selected in the not very promising—for a Conservative—seat of North Southwark and Bermondsey. At the time, my political mentor was Sir Rhodes Boyson. He was then the Member of Parliament for Brent, North and I am sure that many of my colleagues will remember him. After my selection, I phoned Sir Rhodes excitedly to tell him. He replied, "That's very good, Grant. You've been selected for a safe seat." I said, "No, Sir Rhodes, I was selected for North Southwark and Bermondsey." He said, "Yes, and now you'll be safe in the knowledge you can spend another five years in your printing company." He was absolutely right.

When the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) was returned after the election in 1997, he said that I had received the lowest Conservative vote in the country. I have waited eight years to be able to correct that statement on the record: the hon. Gentleman was wrong because I had the third worst result for a Conservative candidate. I am glad to be able to put the matter straight.

I am Hertfordshire born and bred and now have the privilege of representing the Hertfordshire seat of Welwyn Hatfield. I went to a state school, Watford grammar, and to Cassio college in Watford. Then I went to Manchester Metropolitan university, then called Manchester polytechnic. I was always anxious to go into politics and, in addition to starting a printing business, I was selected to fight Welwyn Hatfield for the first time in 2001. I made an impact on the result, but I did not have the killer benefit that I had in the election a few weeks ago when the Chancellor—I am sorry that he has now left the Chamber—was kind enough to visit the constituency and assist me to a 6,000 majority.

Welwyn Hatfield constituency contains two new towns, Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne did, I shall give the House a quick tour of my constituency. There are several villages on the outskirts of the two towns, including Welwyn, Woolmer Green, Oaklands, Essendon, Brookmans Park, Welham Green, Lemsford and The Ayots, where George Bernard Shaw lived and wrote. The constituency is a nice area with many contrasts. It has some lovely open spaces, such as Stanborough park and lakes and the King George V park, which the concept of the garden new towns allowed for. On the other hand, we have significant difficulties and problems, with many neighbourhood shops that suffer from antisocial behaviour by so-called nuisance youths who hang around.

When I surveyed the residents of Welwyn Hatfield last year, their No. 1 concern was antisocial behaviour, which topped the list by a long way. That is significant, and I fought the election on that issue. I am sure that it is shared with other hon. Members and I intend to focus my attention on it.

Another issue that loomed large in the election concerned the Queen Elizabeth II hospital, particularly the closure of children's accident and emergency at night time. As a local father of three, I find it unacceptable that I am now expected to drive my children in the middle of the night perhaps during some emergency to the Lister hospital in Stevenage, as do many of my constituents who are equally angered by this. I intend to represent them intensely on this.

The university of Hertfordshire, in Hatfield, has grown large over the past few years. I welcome it and am pleased that it has made Hatfield its home. However, in many ways it is rather like a large elephant: it has a particularly big footprint. It is a friendly animal but when it puts its foot down, it does not realise what it is crushing. Many long-term residents have found themselves forced out of their own areas by the increased population of students. I do not blame the students. Insufficient accommodation on the campus is provided for them. There are huge problems in Hatfield of overcrowding, parking and properties rented by students falling into dilapidation.

My constituency, like many others, contains many wonderful people—constituents who work selflessly. I am thinking of people like Brenda Beach. For the past 30 years she has run the Gateway club for people with learning disabilities with no recognition and unpaid. Then there is Sean Cox MBE. He spends his entire time raising funds so that on Christmas day 100-plus elderly and otherwise lonely people can have a wonderful lunch and take a present home. His entire year is spent doing nothing else. He is in many senses a hero of our community. For the past 30 years, Barry Clark has run the Breaks Manor youth club in Hatfield, helping to find constructive activities for children. He has done so through thick and thin—through changes in policy on youth services, this that and the other—which could otherwise have knocked him off course. I pay tribute to such people who make Welwyn Hatfield such a pleasant place to live.

Finally, I am one of the few Members of the House who has the privilege of travelling home to my constituency each and every evening. It is a wonderful place to live and I look forward to being a strong voice for Welwyn Hatfield in Parliament.

1.13 pm

Vera Baird (Redcar) (Lab): First, I take the opportunity to praise both new Members who have made excellent maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker), who showed us his energy

[Vera Baird]

and humour, is welcome in this House. He rightly praised his predecessor, Dame Marion Roe, who was a great parliamentarian and a good Minister. Of particular interest to me was her work on domestic violence and the like, long before such matters had come on to anyone else's agenda. The hon. Gentleman was right to praise her. He demonstrated that he will follow that hard act well in his own inimitable style.

The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) delivered a confident speech, which was most impressive. He did not appear to have a single note—unless, perhaps, he had notes written on some secret part of his anatomy. He, too, displayed a great deal of humour and, rightly, praised his predecessor, Melanie Johnson, who was an excellent Minister and, indeed, had difficulties to contend with. At this early stage, the hon. Gentleman has already demonstrated a close knowledge of his constituency—its people and its problems—and that he intends to campaign strongly for it. Both Members are very welcome to the House and I congratulate them both.

I wish to speak for a short time about an exciting development project facing my north country constituency of Redcar as well as the Tees valley, for the achievement of which we may need some Government help. Teesport is the second largest port in the United Kingdom. It lies in my constituency and north-west of Redcar seaside town. Since its foundation in 1852 it has served the Tees valley. The Tees was the principal artery for the export of iron and steel in the industrial revolution. Iron was originally mined in Eston in my constituency and turned into steel at Grangetown and South Bank in my constituency and in Middlesbrough. Indeed, the amazing development of towns such as Middlesbrough during the industrial revolution was based on their closeness to the North sea and the availability of an excellent port. There continues to be a strong link between the river, the port and the steel industry.

Last December I was privileged to attend the celebration for the export of the 1 millionth tonne of steel through Teesport from Redcar steel works. It was going to South Korea to be part of a ship being built by a company called Dongicuk. Now my steelworks has a 10-year contract to export all of its 3.5 million tonne capacity, much of which will go through the port to a foreign consortium. This is part of the reason why Teesport has developed rapidly to become the United Kingdom's second largest port, handling 54 million tonnes of cargo a year.

Teesport is second only to Grimsby and Immingham and in 2002 it overtook London. It is significantly bigger than the fourth, Southampton, overall and, surprisingly for the north-east, the port of Tyne—which people would probably think of as the biggest port there—is small in comparison. It deals with about 2.8 million tonnes of cargo a year, and the other ports are very small indeed. There are 530 direct employees at Teesport now.

Teesport goes back to the industrial revolution and has gone through privatisation and a series of owners, but it started to kick off in 2000 when it was taken over by Nikko, appropriately described as venture capitalists; then there was a sale in 2004 and a flotation on the stock exchange. It has developed through that series of steps, increasing container traffic, for example, from 20,000 units in 2001 to 90,000 units in 2002. It has dynamic, ambitious management. In 2003 there was a need to open a second container terminal. It was opened by the Duke of York and, with additional secondary handling capacity, Teesport can now cope with 200,000 containers a year. It is the container traffic development opportunity on which I want to focus.

The United Kingdom container market is expected to grow by about 5 per cent. a year to reach over 10 million TEUs—20 ft equivalent units. That is obviously a standard measure. The world container shipping market is growing rapidly and over the past few years has been fuelled by manufacturing in the far east, particularly in China. In the United Kingdom this deep-sea increase in volume is growing fastest. The major existing United Kingdom container ports are Felixstowe, Thamesport, Tilbury, Southampton and Liverpool. In 2003, 74 per cent. of all deep-sea UK traffic went through Felixstowe and Southampton.

Teesport is ambitious to share in the increase in the market. I want to emphasise that there is not a collision of interests between this northern port and the southern ports of Felixstowe, Harwich and London because we are talking about a share of a growing market. Teesport is keen to invest £300 million to expand its deep-sea container terminal to bring freight, essentially from the far east although also from elsewhere, into northern England and the distribution centres, which would be engines of job creation before the goods are sent by rail and road elsewhere.

Interestingly, more than 2 million of the current units of deep-sea container trade that come into the country through the southern ports of Harwich, Felixstowe and London are destined for Birmingham and further north. According to the Government's figures, 60 per cent. of all freight traffic that comes through the southern ports is bound for Birmingham and the north. As road haulage costs, fuel prices, congestion and climate change increase significantly, there is obviously a great deal of interest in trying to change logistical patterns of that kind.

Teesport estimates—this is music to the ears of anyone who comes from my part of the country—that this investment could generate up to 7,000 jobs in Tees valley, where although the steel industry is now doing well and the chemical industry is thriving, our unemployment is still twice the national average. Teesport also estimates that it would take millions of lorry miles off the roads if northern goods were driven from northern ports rather than offloaded in the south and taken north. It would go some way to close the £29 billion economic output gap between the south and the north. It would improve access to the North sea ports. It would help end the capacity shortage at UK ports generally and it would stop what we in the north call southern discomfort, by cutting congestion on already over-congested roads and rail. It would also develop hundreds of acres of brownfield land, much of it left over from the steel industry, which I have mentioned, in my area, whereas in the southern ports some development on green belt is likely to occur.

Sounds wonderful—so what is the problem? Teesport will put in a planning application—known technically as a harbour revision order—very soon. The potential problem is that there is not currently a national ports

strategy to look at strategic development of all the ports, and the implications of development in different regions and sub-regions, although such a strategy is promised soon. There are currently well-advanced applications to expand immediately the three southern ports that I have referred to as the major container importers and exporters, because for overall capacity needs to increase.

Let me emphasise again that there is not really any rivalry here; there is no intent to steal jobs—we are simply talking about coping with an expansion in container traffic. However, Felixstowe south has applied to increase its capacity by 1.8 million units—a very large amount indeed—and has had a public inquiry. Bathside bay, which is the other side of Felixstowe, has also had a public inquiry; it has an ambition to expand to a similar capacity. It has some problems, in that parts of it would be on a greenfield site. Shellhaven, which is in London, has also put in an application to expand by 3 million units. It will have some dredging and connectivity problems.

Bob Spink: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way, as she has mentioned my constituency?

Vera Baird: I am delighted to do so.

Bob Spink: I am following the hon. and learned Lady carefully and she is speaking a lot of sense. Shellhaven is a new application, on which the Minister has just put off his decision; we are waiting for that. Part of the Government's difficulty in taking these strategic decisions about the capacity of container ports across the country is the absence of an overall comprehensive strategic plan for the development of container traffic in this country. However, such a plan is very necessary. Will she join me in calling for the Government to develop such a strategic plan, so that we can minimise the number of road miles that this container traffic travels?

Vera Baird: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It seems to me imperative that, rather than looking individually at the three current applications and responding to them on the semi-local basis on which they would normally be dealt with, the Government should put them aside for the time being while a comprehensive strategy emerges. It needs to emerge fast, so that they do not, as it were, hijack the agenda and the strategic development of ports by just granting or not granting individual applications. So I definitely would welcome the hon. Gentleman's support because I intend to ask the Government to look very quickly at the formation of a national ports strategy.

There has been some resistance to expansion in the locations of the southern ports. As the hon. Gentleman knows, in Shellhaven there have been complaints that no more jobs are needed there, and complaints about threats to nature reserves and important historic sites elsewhere. It makes an interesting contrast to my own cry in my local press, where the potential of 7,000 new jobs was offered to Teesside, that this is capable of almost putting an end to our very local unemployment problems—so we have it in a nutshell why some development is urgently needed. It is a rational way to expand ports without having the whole proposition jump-started by the granting of ad hoc consents.

The Northern Way, a strategy backed by £100 million of development cash, recommends that we introduce a national ports strategy and take the opportunity to expand the share of cargo using the north's ports. Clearly, PD Teesport's planned expansion directly supports that important policy.

The purpose of my speech this afternoon is to say how excited we are in my constituency and in Tees valley by this proposition; to point to the need for a strategy that will permit the careful consideration of where the development emphasis should be; and to put the Government on notice that I and my four colleague MPs in Teesside intend to campaign forcefully for a national ports strategy soon. Because we believe that the business case for Teesport is absolutely clear, our aim is to ensure that this great development—which can reverse, even more fully than the Government's economic stability over the last seven years has done, the decline that my part of the country suffered under the preceding Government, and can be a huge contributor to making the economy of Tees valley much more dynamic—comes about. We shall be campaigning on that for the next few months.

1.27 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to be able to congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) and for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) on extremely fluent and excellent maiden speeches. We all remember the horror and the trauma of having to sit around waiting to make our maiden speeches, but the fluency and effortless ease with which both my hon. Friends spoke suggest that they were either on pills or have nerves of steel that I did not have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield will clearly be a strong voice for that constituency and I am sure that, over very many years, his constituents will benefit from his advocacy of their causes in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, in a very interesting speech, was perhaps a little too modest—characteristically so. He said that there were 3,000 Members of Parliament before he arrived here and there would probably in the next century be another 3,000, and that he would play a small part in the life of this parliamentary system. I think that that is characteristically modest of him because I am sure, from the way he spoke with affection and vigour on behalf of his constituents, he will represent them excellently in all our debates in the coming years.

I am particularly pleased to speak in this debate because I believe it is important, prior to the beginning of the Whitsun recess, that we consider the issues behind a report that was published last week, and which received some notice but not that much. I refer to the Office of Fair Trading report on care homes for older people in the United Kingdom. For every hon. Member, the care of the elderly is of crucial importance and concern.

[Mr. Simon Burns]

We all believe, rightly, that elderly people must live with the dignity, respect and help, where it is needed, that they rightly deserve. Conservative Members also believe— although, certainly in our debates in the last Parliament, certain uncharitable Health Ministers would not give us the credit for it—that the most appropriate type of care should be given to our elderly citizens, and I am sure that Labour Members believe that, too. For many elderly people, domiciliary care in their homes, with a care package, is the most appropriate form of care.

I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will relay to the Department of Health the fact that I am disappointed by the latest figures, which were published today. Despite the Government's fervent claims that they are committed to providing domiciliary care, those figures show that although the number of hours of domiciliary care given to individuals has increased, the number of individuals receiving that care has been reduced yet again. That is of concern.

The OFT report raises a number of interesting and important issues that relate to transparency. For many individuals who require residential care, their needs come all of a sudden, possibly as a result of a stay in hospital, and many of them may still be in a confused state or recovering from illness and waiting to leave hospital. They are not always best able to cope and to take what are extraordinarily important decisions about their future life. What they must decide about is the home that they will live in for a number of years—we hope many years—and they and their families may not be in a position of ease and understanding to take the right decision at the time. That is why is it important that as much information as possible is provided to help them—of course, with advice from social services departments and the care homes themselves—to take the decision that is in their best interests for their long-term well-being.

The recommendations in the OFT report must be considered seriously. We do not need a knee-jerk reaction where we must accept everything that is proposed, but we must certainly consider such proposals carefully. We must strike a balance between the nanny state—the immediate instinct of any interfering Government to throw legislation, rules and regulations at everything that is proposed—and what would be a genuine and helpful improvement in the situation that would facilitate people gaining access to more information, so that they could take rational decisions when they have to do so. That is why I urge the Government not to jump on any passing bandwagon and immediately say, "We've got to do this; we've got to do that".

Heaven knows, most of us should have learned during the last general election campaign, when we were communicating with our employers, that the care home sector has been so overburdened during the past eight years by petty regulations and rules and by the need for Ministers to be seen to be doing something that it has crippled the ability of many homes to continue to exist and to provide the services and high-quality care that our elderly population deserves.

During the past eight years, more than 80,000 beds have been lost in care homes throughout the country. That is a disgrace. It is all right for Ministers to huff and puff, but it is deeply offensive to care home owners and their staff, who work day in, day out to provide the finest quality of care and quality of life for individuals, to hear people such as the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), making accusations about elderly people being banged up in care homes, and for a previous junior Health Minister, now the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), echoing his master's voice in the same derogatory terms.

Care home owners are not keeping their client group banged up in care homes; they are seeking to provide the highest quality of care. I am glad that the Deputy Leader of the House nods in agreement. Given that he agrees with that statement, perhaps he would like to have a word with Health Ministers to ensure that such unfortunate slurs on those people who are doing so much good for our elderly population stop being made from the Dispatch Box, so that we have no more of the clap-trap that the right hon. Member for Darlington and the hon. Member for South Thanet echoed from the Dispatch Box during the last Parliament.

In one respect, the OFT report represents a missed opportunity. Sadly, when the OFT announced its investigation, it used very narrow criteria, although the official Opposition urged the OFT to widen its scope at the time. Part of the equation involves looking at how residential care is funded. I do not suggest that we should consider how much residential and social care is funded to the levels in such a report, but we should consider the mechanics because there is a serious problem.

The problem is twofold. First, throughout the country social service departments use, to put it crudely, their bulk purchasing power to tell care homes what price they are prepared to pay per week, per client, and they do so on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. One often finds—particularly with small, family-run homes or medium-sized homes—that what is offered is, at best, equivalent to the actual cost of the care and, at worst, below the actual cost of the care. That does nothing to encourage and enhance the quality of care for those residents. It is wrong that local authorities can adopt that attitude because I should have thought that, among other things, it would be anti-competitive.

We know that the Competition Appeal Tribunal in Belfast looked into this issue two years ago, and it believed that such practices were anti-competitive. Unfortunately, I am not a lawyer, so I do not understand how English Health Ministers can tell me that the decision of the Belfast Competition Appeal Tribunal has no relevance and cannot be translated to mainland England. Something must be done to look into the matter because it is apparently a clear case of anti-competitive practice.

The other problem, which causes considerable confusion and misunderstanding, and which I cannot fathom properly, is that in those areas where social services departments own their own homes, they are more than happy to pay themselves infinitely more money per week, per client than they will pay the private provider to care for a client. The situation in the city of

Birmingham is a classic case in the extreme. The latest figures that I have, which relate to last year, show that Birmingham social services department was prepared to pay its own residential care homes £775 per resident, per week, but was prepared to pay the independent residential care homes in Birmingham only £310 per week, per resident.

Those figures are extreme, but they are reflected throughout the country, although the gap elsewhere is not so great. However, in Birmingham there is now the wholesale closure of care homes that just cannot continue to provide care at the prices that they are forced to take—or leave, which means closure—because of the decision of Birmingham city council's social services department. That seems odd. There is a shortage of beds in the city in any case, but it has been grossly exacerbated in the past four years because of that policy. How is it that a local authority can find the money to pay its own homes so much, yet claim poverty and refuse to pay more to other care homes? That leads to an even more disturbing knock-on effect, which was highlighted in an editorial in *The Times*.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): Both of the anti-competitive practices that my hon. Friend is outlining apply to my constituency in the Cotswolds. My constituents who go into care homes pay more and are subsidising the local authority patients in those homes.

Mr. Burns: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue and I am pleased to see so many of my new hon. Friends in the Chamber because they have just seen a classic example of how perspicacious my hon. Friend is. He made the very point that I was about to raise from *The Times* editorial.

As my hon. Friend has rightly drawn to my attention, the practice has another knock-on effect, which is, as *The Times* editorial of last Thursday so succinctly said,

"the concern that the fees of people who pay for their own care"—

in residential homes—

"may be rising to make up a shortfall left by local authorities not paying enough to cover the costs of the residents whom they are supposed to support."

If the state, through social services departments, is not prepared to pay an acceptable level of fee per person, it is morally wrong that the fallback position, to stop the homes going out of business, is that people with assets of more than £20,000 have to pay their own fees and that their assets are thus diminishing every year. There is a double whammy, adding insult to injury, as they have to subsidise the local authority-paid clients because the local authority will not pay a realistic fee. That is morally wrong. That situation must be looked into and addressed, because it should not and must not continue.

It is for those reasons that I welcome the opportunity to raise these issues. I hope that, through the Minister, my concerns and those of my hon. Friends can be translated to the relevant Minister at the Department of Health, so that we can have an intelligent investigation and discussion of the issues rather than a knee-jerk reaction. For eight long years we have found that whenever anything goes wrong, whenever there is a problem, it is everybody's fault except that of the Ministers on the Treasury Bench.

1.43 pm

Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my first speech in this Parliament. I congratulate other hon. Members on their maiden speeches, which were highly entertaining in many cases, earlier in the debate.

I start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Adrian Flook, the previous Conservative Member for Taunton, who was a diligent and hard-working Member of the House during the last Parliament. His predecessor, Jackie Ballard, was the first woman to represent Taunton and the first Liberal Democrat this side of the second world war. Her predecessor was another Conservative, David Nicholson. I am in fact the fourth person to represent Taunton in the last four Parliaments and I think that I am the representative of the only constituency where the incumbent has lost at each of the past three general elections, so I hope that there will be widespread support in the House—although I do not necessarily expect to find it—for my campaign to bring some much-needed electoral and representative stability to the people of the Taunton constituency in the years to come.

Taunton is a somewhat misleadingly named constituency; it is much wider than the county town itself. The constituency stretches to the Somerset levels to the east; to Exmoor in the west, where there is some of the most beautiful countryside in Britain, including Dulverton and the surrounding villages; to the Blackdown hills in the south, which afford a magnificent view down to Taunton and beyond; and to the Quantock hills in the north. It includes some beautiful and picturesque villages with evocative names, such as Lydeard St. Lawrence, Combe Florey, Langford Budville and Sampford Arundel.

The constituency is diverse. The town of Taunton is big enough to have some urban characteristics, while at the other end of the scale there are remote, rural communities which see the affairs of the nation somewhat differently from people in towns and certainly the bigger cities. Also in the constituency is Wellington, a proud and independent-minded town, which is overlooked by the famous Wellington monument. Our hope and expectation is that Wellington will become the venue for the new Taunton Deane livestock market at Chelston on the edge of the town and that that will bring great benefits not only to the agricultural community in my area but to Wellington itself.

Taunton is the county town, the business and administrative centre of Somerset and the home of the county council. I have the good fortune to live right in the middle of Taunton, little more than a muscular, Bothamesque six from the county cricket ground. Next month Somerset will be the host for our Australian visitors for a one-day match at the ground, and I hope that I do not sound too churlish a host when I say that I confidently expect Somerset to inflict on our guests a humbling experience that will set the tone for the remainder of the summer.

Taunton is also the home of several important public, civic organisations, one of which is the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, which maps the seas and oceans of the world on behalf of the Government, commercial organisations and friendly Governments with whom we want to share such information. It is a sign of Britain's

[Jeremy Browne]

historical role and also of our current global ambitions that the UK is one of only three or four countries that aspire to that task on a global scale.

Musgrove Park hospital in Taunton serves a community that is wider than the constituency itself, including many people in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). There are two pressing projects at the hospital that I hope will be completed during this Parliament, if not sooner. The first is the building of a multi-storey car park to ease chronic congestion and parking problems at the hospital. The second, more important, project is the completion of a cancer centre. At present, people in the Taunton constituency who suffer from cancer often have to travel, with their families, to Bristol for treatment, a round trip of about 100 miles at a time of difficulty and stress. It is immensely important that the new cancer centre at Musgrove Park is completed. It will make a large difference to the people I represent.

I have a personal ambition: to ensure that school standards in Somerset remain high and rise further. I have the great honour and privilege to be a governor at Ladymead community school in north Taunton. Other contributions to the debate have touched on the fact that Somerset currently receives less per pupil than the national average, yet we manage to achieve in our schools better results than the national average. I hope that we can continue to raise standards, because opportunity, ambition and aspiration are important qualities in an advanced and advancing society. I want to bring those attributes to children in Somerset and beyond.

I finish by making a slightly wider point about the Government's legislative agenda. I share the view expressed earlier that antisocial behaviour is a very important problem; it is the most commonly raised issue with me when I knock on people's doors. I welcome the fact that the Government have placed such emphasis on it and on what they call the "respect agenda" in the Queen's Speech and their programme for the Parliament as a whole. Politicians can make a number of differences in this regard. I have been very impressed, for example, by the role of the community support officers with whom I have been out on patrol in Taunton, Wellington and some of the surrounding rural areas. As long as they are not a substitute for the regular police but are an additional resource for the regular police, I would like to see their numbers expanded further to cover the other communities in my area where they do not currently serve.

A matter that is closer to home rather than having a wider application is the consideration that I would like to be given to Somerset having its own police force. At the moment, we have an artificial construct whereby Somerset is in the same police area as Bristol, which has very different policing requirements—the policing requirements of a large city whereas Somerset is a predominantly rural county. There is a widespread feeling particularly in west Somerset that the crime requirements in Bristol and the need to reduce crime on behalf of Avon and Somerset police mean that priority is not always given to Somerset and west Somerset. In time, I would like the Government to consider that issue as well.

There are a number of issues associated with crime and antisocial behaviour that it is not possible for politicians to tackle directly through legislation. We cannot pass laws here automatically making people good mannered and considerate, but we can try to address the underlying causes of crime and antisocial behaviour. Yes that is about education, good parenting and what the Government call "respect" and I may call "civic mindedness", but it is ultimately about making sure that people in Taunton and the country as a whole not only enjoy a good standing of living but a good quality of life. That may be something that we can all aspire to achieve and advance in our time in Parliament. That goes very much for me.

I am grateful to hon. Members on all sides for their indulgence over the past 10 minutes, and I have enjoyed making a contribution in this debate. I hope to make and enjoy making many more speeches in my time in Parliament.

1.52 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak so early. I appreciate that.

I rise with some fear and trepidation not only because the House is full of hon. Friends and Members who have served it with distinction and who are renowned for their thoughtful and eloquent speeches, but because so many new Members—namely, on this side, my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) and for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps)—have made excellent speeches. I also include the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil), who is no longer in his place. I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the western isles, to Scotland and to *Hansard* for my pronunciation of his constituency. I also include the new Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne).

I pay tribute to the eight years of public service that my predecessor gave to The Wrekin constituency. His philosophy on life and politics remain different from my own, and his approach to matters of public policy and personalities is also somewhat different. However, I recognise that he committed eight years of his life to public service in this place and, for that indisputable fact, I pay him tribute here today.

Public service remains a great privilege and honour, and I am grateful to my constituents in The Wrekin for allowing me to serve them in this place. Indeed, I am the first Conservative MP to be elected for The Wrekin since the major boundary changes of 1997. With the attractive market towns of Wellington, Newport and Shifnal, with the pretty villages of Albrighton, High Ercall, Sheriffhales and Tibberton and with the dominating geological feature of The Wrekin itself—it is an area of outstanding natural beauty that towers 400 m over the rest of Shropshire—The Wrekin is rural England at its very best.

Those Members who have visited my constituency know that, in geographic terms, it is mostly rural. That means that for many of the people whom I represent the success of the rural sector and Shropshire's rural way of life is of paramount importance if The Wrekin is to

continue to thrive not just in terms of rising living standards, but culturally and in self-confidence. That is why I hope that the Government might recognise that the success of urban England is inextricably linked with the success of rural England. Yes they are different, but they should be treated equally.

Manufacturing also remains a key sector, and I hope that the Government will do more to ensure no further demise in the UK manufacturing sector, not least in the defence and technology manufacturing areas of the country and, indeed, in The Wrekin. In my area, that sector provides employment to hundreds of my constituents, which, in turn, creates demand and spend for The Wrekin's market towns.

The defence sector is a key employer in The Wrekin, with RAF Cosford being one of the largest operational RAF stations in the world. It encompasses the defence college of aeronautical engineering, and there is also the defence repair, supply, logistics and procurement facility at Donington, with its numerous local suppliers of support services. That means that forthcoming decisions by Ministers over matters relating to defence spending and rationalisation—not least, the Government's review of the Army's supply and logistics capabilities—will be of great interest indeed. The Wrekin has a proud history of working alongside the Ministry of Defence and Her Majesty's armed forces, and long may that continue. This country faces many challenges, not only in domestic policy but in international affairs. Therefore, my responsibility as a new Member, despite my fresher status, is both a sombre and challenging one.

Britain today, as many Members have mentioned, is a world in which authority is undermined every hour of every day. It is as if "authority" is an unattractive word—a word that dare not mention its name. We have seen authority taken away from parents, from teachers, from police officers and, perhaps as concerning, taken away from the very institution of collective government and the role of this Parliament in bringing the Executive to account. That is why I welcome Mr. Speaker's comments on the first day of this Parliament, and dare I be as bold as to paraphrase them? This House is justified in its expectation that key Government announcements should be made to Parliament first.

The domestic challenges that face us, many of which require urgent attention, might lend themselves to hasty legislation and quick law, but decisions made in haste do not usually stand the test of time. On important issues such as health and welfare reform and pensions reform, it is time, valuable time, that many of my constituents do not have should the Government fail to get things right. That is why I have concerns about some of the Government's proposed Bills, as set out in the Gracious Speech. However, I defer to convention, and hope to raise these concerns on another occasion. Suffice it to say that the Government's "apologesis" of limited funding inputs from past Conservative Administrations cannot continue as a credible rebuttal given that they have been in power for eight years.

I also hope that, in seeking to curb incitement to religious hatred, the Government will not forget to balance this worthy aspiration with the rights of an individual's freedom of speech, which British subjects have enjoyed for hundreds of years. In a free and fair liberal democracy such as ours, rigorous debate, challenge and scrutiny of all religions and beliefs, and indeed the right of people to have no belief, are surely signs of society's strength, not its weakness.

Let us not forget that many people left these shores several hundred years ago for a place across the pond, arguably because of the Government of the day's interference with freedom of speech and religion. Indeed, some might suggest that the Government need to tread carefully with their necessary continuation of promoting equal rights so that they ensure that they do not create special rights that might serve only to produce intolerance and misunderstanding of the very sections of British society that they are rightly trying to protect. In nobly seeking inclusivity, the Government should be cautious not to create a new exclusivity. I have a large Sikh and Muslim community in my constituency, as well as a vibrant ecumenical movement among churches, and have committed myself to trying to protect any diminution of the right of freedom of speech. For the record, that includes political freedom of speech and the right unashamedly to promote the British national self-interest, however politically incorrect that might be today or in the future.

During my time in this place—however short or long—I hope that the Government will ponder the attraction of better law, rather than more law. In so doing, I hope that they might engage the whole House, including, dare I venture, even the occasional Back Bencher from a beautiful constituency in Shropshire called The Wrekin.

2.2 pm

Mr. Greg Hands (Hammersmith and Fulham) (Con): I want to speak about the threat to our local hospital in Hammersmith and Fulham: the Charing Cross. First, however, I congratulate my hon. Friends who have made their maiden speeches during this debate: my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker), for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) and for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). I am also known as something of a polyglot, so I shall try to offer my congratulations to the hon. Members for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil) and for Taunton (Jeremy Browne).

I want to say a few words about my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Hammersmith and Fulham, Iain Coleman. It would be fair to say that Mr. Coleman made most of his impact in the constituency. In fact, his surgeries became something of a legend locally as he seemed to spend his entire time in an almost perpetual surgery at all times and for all hours—except during Arsenal games. Mr. Coleman has not been well for a year and I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will join me in wishing him a full recovery and a return to politics as soon as possible. His predecessor as MP for the Fulham part of the constituency was Matthew Carrington, who was a popular, respected and effective MP for 10 years. He was enormously supportive and helpful in my efforts to win back the seat on 5 May.

It was rather more difficult to find out about the previous Conservative MP for Hammersmith, as distinct from Fulham, because I am the first Conservative MP for Hammersmith since 1964. Probably the most famous previous Hammersmith MP was one William Bull. Mr. Bull represented the area for

[Mr. Greg Hands]

37 years between 1892 and 1929. He had the unusual and tragic misfortune to lose his wife to pneumonia after she had been out canvassing for him. For someone who died of pneumonia, Mrs. Bull is ironically commemorated with a sundial in Ravenscourt park in my constituency.

Mr. Bull won his first election by only 19 votes. While he was an MP he became a senior partner of his law firm. That is an impressive sounding achievement, until one discovers that the firm was called Bull and Bull. He was a man ahead of his time as he was in favour of votes for women and the Channel tunnel, although these days I expect that the latter is more controversial than the former. Most bizarrely, my predecessor was ordered out of the House by Mr. Speaker's predecessor for calling the then Prime Minister a traitor—which these days is perhaps more in tune with east London than west London politics.

In truth, the constituency of Hammersmith and Fulham is more famous for its elections than its MPs. I cite the East Fulham by-election of 1933, the battles of Barons Court of the 1960s and the Fulham by-election of 1986. All those have the common characteristic of being won by the Labour party. However, I believe that one of the most significant Hammersmith and Fulham election results was the one just a couple of weeks ago on 5 May. The recorded swing of almost 7.5 per cent. was one of the highest in the UK. The seat was the Conservatives' No. 1 inner-city target, and a new 5,000 majority has been created. Together with the impressive results achieved in London by my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Burrowes), for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), for Putney (Justine Greening), for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Evennett), for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling), for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) and for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott), my result shows that we as a party are making great progress in London again.

The Labour party barely got started in the campaign. It was barely seen, barely heard and had little positive to say about its eight years in government. Meanwhile, the Lib Dems ran a candidate from Tunbridge Wells under the slogan, "Give Peace a Chance." Perhaps they were more the surreal alternative.

Hammersmith and Fulham is one of the smallest constituencies in Britain, but it is none the less one of the most diverse. It is also one of the closest to Parliament. As my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield mentioned, it is quite possible to get back to Hammersmith and Fulham from the House at the end of each evening. In fact, I am probably one of the few Members with a direct door-to-door bus route from just outside Big Ben to just outside his house. That sounds fantastic, until one considers that given traffic in London, it can take up to two hours to complete the journey.

Prior to 5 May, some newspapers made great play of the fact that no premiership football ground was located in a Conservative seat. Some claimed that that showed that the Conservative party was not represented in the inner cities. All that has now changed, for I represent a constituency in which not just one, but two premiership clubs are located: Fulham and Chelsea. Notwithstanding the heroic events in Istanbul last night, I was delighted to see the streets of my constituency decked out in blue last Sunday to welcome their new champion. I refer of course to Chelsea football club, but "blue is the colour" is surely the future there politically as well, even if I say that as a Fulham fan.

Hammersmith and Fulham is also distinctive for having more tube users than any other borough in Britain and the greatest number of single women compared with single men in the United Kingdom. It is also the home of the Olympia exhibition centre and part of Earls Court. Its largest employer is the BBC, and it is the home of what is reputed to be Europe's busiest road interchange at Hammersmith Broadway. It is also the London home to dozens of hon. Members, which can make canvassing in certain streets straightforward. Many hon. Members from both major parties have cut their teeth in local Hammersmith and Fulham politics.

The election in Hammersmith and Fulham was all about the dreaded congestion charge extension, the fact that eight out of nine muggers in my constituency go unpunished, the fact that a quarter of the borough's secondary schools are on special measures, the appalling state of the District line and high council tax.

Perhaps the greatest concern, however, and why I wanted to speak in the debate, is the threat to the Charing Cross hospital. On the very day that the election was supposed to be called—a good day to bury bad news, one might say—on 4 April 2005, an announcement was made at a meeting with the chief executive of the NHS hospitals trust that the world famous Charing Cross hospital would either be demolished or possibly have its specialised services moved to the Hammersmith hospital on the Wormwood Scrubs site. That would be a crazy move, and it is one that I have been elected in part to prevent.

Charing Cross is a marvellous facility—the centrepiece of a three star-rated hospital trust. It is a global leader in cancer care, vascular surgery, neurosurgery, plastic surgery and much else. It is the trauma centre for the whole of west London and is ideally situated just off the A4 for any major incident at Heathrow. Most of all, it is also a local hospital, serving the needs not only of Hammersmith and Fulham, but of other parts of west London, and is easily accessible by tube, bus or car, which Hammersmith hospital is not.

The proposal suits nobody other than the management of the trust, who are in turn driven only by meeting Government targets, which have led to huge deficits in both the local primary care trust and the hospitals trust. In classic new Labour fashion, spin doctors were deployed to deny the initial press reports in *The Observer* that the Charing Cross site would be sold off. Interestingly, however, there was no denial of the plans to move all or most of the specialised services to the Hammersmith site. I expect that more will be heard on the topic in the House, and I look forward to winning the battle with the Government to leave Charing Cross services on their current site.

In conclusion, many people have asked me and others why the Conservatives did so well in Hammersmith and Fulham and elsewhere in London. The answer is that people in London are overtaxed and face declining public services. I predict major changes in the control of London boroughs in next May's election.

I am delighted to become the first Conservative MP for Hammersmith since 1964 and the first-ever Conservative MP for the combined seat of Hammersmith and Fulham.

2.12 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): I have not spoken in the House for some time and it gives me great pleasure to make a contribution.

I begin by complimenting some of the previous speakers. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) made an excellent speech on issues that affect constituents across the country. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends who made their maiden speeches. I am not in that envious position, but I will pay tribute to my predecessor shortly.

There was a passionate and enthusiastic speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) and a confident and articulate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps). I look forward to working with both of them on some of the issues they raised. My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) made a thoughtful speech, which detailed some of the problems facing his constituency under the Labour Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands) gave us a valuable historical insight into the facts of his success and some of the issues that concern him in his London constituency. The hon. Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne) spoke with kindness about his predecessors in a seat that we shall all watch closely at the next election.

I wanted to speak in the debate on the Queen's Speech earlier this week, but was not successful. I want to put on record my concerns about policing in Norfolk. Before I do so, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend Baroness Shephard. She worked tirelessly for South-West Norfolk. As a constituent said to me during the campaign:

"She was a standard bearer for all that is honourable, has a razor-sharp mind and a brilliant intelligence to match the best."

Those words perfectly sum up my right hon. Friend. The other place will be enriched by her wisdom and experience. It is said that any person one meets in South-West Norfolk knows someone whom my right hon. Friend has helped. I hope, by the work that I undertake in the constituency, that I can aspire to achieve some, if not all, of what she has achieved over the years.

Baroness Shephard rose through the ranks of the Conservative party faster than I can account for here today. Her dedication and diligence resulted in the reward of holding some of the greatest offices of state. She achieved so much by listening to people and reacting to them with energy and enthusiasm. One of the things that she championed was the right for people to feel safe in their homes. Over the years, she has led many debates and tabled many questions on law and order in rural areas.

My constituency covers more than 1,000 square miles of open countryside. As my right hon. Friend said in her maiden speech some years ago,

"Such a... diverse constituency is bound to have its problems"—[*Official Report*, 23 October 1987; Vol. 120, c.1040.],

but the people of Norfolk look to their representatives to articulate their concerns and come up with some solutions. That is why the Conservative party made specific commitments on law and order at the election.

My right hon. Friend debated in the House the lessons learned about rural crime and policing in the aftermath of the Tony Martin case. Like my right hon. Friend, I am of the view that police resources are too thinly spread because the Government have focused on the wrong things. The Tony Martin case revealed people's attitudes to policing in rural areas and their ability to protect themselves in their own homes. The Government's centralised control of the police has sapped officers' morale in Norfolk and elsewhere, increased bureaucracy and undermined confidence. It is time that we change direction.

There is no doubt that we must recruit 5,000 extra police officers each year. We must radically cut paperwork and introduce genuine local accountability through elected police commissioners, giving local people a say over police priorities. That will lead to genuine neighbourhood policing, with officers based in the locality and clearly focused on zero tolerance.

Although recorded crime in Norfolk is down, certain categories of offences have witnessed increases. The total number of offences against the person rose in 2004–05 from 11,526 to 12,920—up by 12 per cent. Offences of criminal damage have also increased. Such increases are above the national average, as the Norfolk regional press has noted. The Home Secretary has a seat in the county that is not too far from mine, so that should cause him enormous concern. Given my constituents' real concerns about violent crime, he should display to the House in the coming weeks whether he is confident that the violent crimes Bill is not just more legislation, but will really make a difference. I am not so sure from what I have read about it that it will do the job.

Those problems are compounded by the fact that annual detection rates in Norfolk have shown a consistent decline since 1998–99. In that year, the percentage of detected crimes stood at 37 per cent. By 2003–04, that fell to a mere 26 per cent., suggesting that such crimes remain undetected and that the figures are going in the wrong direction.

The Conservative party made a pledge at the last election that the Norfolk constabulary would receive an additional 457 police officers over the next eight years, of which the South-West Norfolk constituency would get an extra 63 officers. I hope that the Home Secretary will come to the House in due course and give a pledge to my constituents that the Government will increase police numbers in Norfolk to match Conservative plans.

We also made it plain at the election that criminals who are caught should be punished properly. Therefore, we must end the Government's early release from prison scheme and provide 20,000 extra prison places. We must introduce honesty in sentencing so that criminals serve the full sentence handed down by the court and so that we deliver in open court the minimum time that they will serve behind bars.

Will the Government confirm that the Management of Offenders and Sentencing Bill, proposed in the Queen's Speech, will contain a provision to enable the Sentencing Guidelines Council to have regard to prison capacity? If it does, will the Home Secretary put on record whether he believes that sentencing should be determined by the crime and not by the number of prison places available?

Nationally, 4,500 crimes have been committed by criminals let out on early release by the Government and 500 of those were violent crimes. That figure is an

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outrage and must be stopped. Will the Government abolish the early release scheme? What do the Home Secretary and his Ministers have to say to the victims of the 4,500 offences, including 500 violent crimes, committed by persons on early release since 1999?

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said recently:

"We must stand up for the silent law-abiding majority who play by the rules and pay their taxes."

I support his sentiments. People think that the position we are in is absurd and they must be able to feel safe in their own homes. If a criminal breaks in, people must be able to defend themselves and, in doing so, must have no fear of the law.

In the last Session of the previous Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer), the shadow Minister for homeland security, proposed a Bill to give greater protection to householders who use force against burglars in the prevention of crime. My hon. Friend said that the fear of imprisonment or physical harm lay with the householder and that the intention of the Bill was to reverse that, because those fears should lie with the burglar. It is a pity that the Bill was not successful and was not supported by the Government.

In *The Daily Telegraph* on 4 December 2004, Sir John Stevens, the then Metropolitan Police Commissioner, argued that those who defend their families and property should face prosecution over injuries to intruders only in extreme circumstances if they can be shown to have used gratuitous violence. The Government will know that there is still considerable anxiety and confusion among my constituents and others about the degree of force that they may use legitimately against an intruder to defend themselves without finding themselves subject to prosecution.

I should like the Home Secretary to address another problem. Does he think that the guidance issued to householders earlier this year on the use of force is sufficient to resolve their doubts? Do the Government intend to revisit this issue and consider changing the law to give householders greater protection?

The Government promised that 5,000 antisocial behaviour orders would be issued every year. We have not reached that figure after six years and, of those issued, nearly half have been breached. They are effectively worthless. We need proper policing by officers on the street who are not tied down by paperwork and bureaucracy. I must ask the Home Secretary whether the Government accept that ASBOs are no substitute for real policing.

Bob Spink: Speaking as someone who was himself a retread, I welcome my hon. Friend back to the Chamber. Is not the point about ASBOs that when they are breached, the courts should hit those yobs hard, generally with a custodial sentence? Only that will send out the message to these people that they must respect the ASBOs and stop their offending behaviour, which is destroying our communities, and stop attacking innocent and often elderly people.

Mr. Fraser: If my voice holds out, I will agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. I believe that the best way to tackle crime effectively is to put more police officers on the street, free of the burden of red tape and political correctness and actually dealing with the Government's failures on crime. I hope that the Home Secretary will address my concerns and those of my constituents.

I have tabled various questions over the past 24 hours or so and I look forward to the answers in relation to policing in places such as Norfolk, because security in one's home, feeling safe and what one can do as an individual without facing the law in an unjust way are issues that have to come to this House in a timely manner. I hope that the relevant Bills in the Queen's Speech will address those matters and that the Home Secretary will ensure that all people in Norfolk—his constituents as well as mine—are better off because of the Government's plans, and not worse off.

2.25 pm

Jenny Willott (Cardiff, Central) (LD): I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches before me, and particular credit goes to those who did so without notes. I look forward to working with new Members on both sides of the House for at least the next four to five years and, I hope, for longer. It is a great honour to make my maiden speech in such impressive surroundings and in such impressive company, in a place with so much history. I should like to claim my own small place in history today as I am the first female Member of Parliament for Cardiff, Central and the first Liberal Democrat woman in Cardiff. There has only ever been one Liberal woman MP in Wales, Megan Lloyd George, who later joined Labour. I can assure the House that history will not be repeating itself.

This year, we had the highest ever Liberal Democrat vote in Cardiff and victory has been a long time coming. The Liberals last won in 1923 when Sir Harry Webb was the MP. But in the year of the Welsh grand slam in the millennium stadium, in the heart of my constituency, the Liberal Democrats have won the grand slam in Cardiff, Central, winning 100 per cent. of the seats at every level of politics. I am proud to be elected to represent the heart of Cardiff in 2005, the centenary of Cardiff becoming a city and the 50th anniversary of Cardiff becoming the Welsh capital.

While I am not staking a claim so early on in my political career, Cardiff, Central has an impressive history of its Members of Parliament becoming Ministers. My immediate predecessor, Jon Owen Jones, was Welsh Health Minister in the run-up to devolution in 1999 and his predecessor Ian Grist was a Conservative Minister in the Welsh Office from 1987 to 1990. I believe that Ian Grist's predecessor, Michael Roberts, was a Conservative Minister in the 1970s.

It is a long-standing tradition of maiden speeches that the new Member of Parliament should say something nice about their predecessor. It must be difficult losing a seat that one has represented for years and, although Jon Owen Jones and I did not see eye to eye, there were a number of issues on which we agreed and I pay tribute to his work on them. During his time in this House, he introduced a ten-minute Bill to ban the sale of junk food in school vending machines. Given the current trend of increasing childhood obesity and the associated health problems, Jon took an important stand on this issue—he was, I suggest, the Jamie Oliver of Parliament and I salute him for it.

I also agreed with Jon about his opposition to the war in Iraq and commend his courage in standing up against his own party on this point of principle. Jon dedicated 13 years of his life to being the Member of Parliament for the people of Cardiff, Central, and I am sure that many would want to thank him for that.

Cardiff, Central is a very diverse constituency, with some of the wealthiest areas in Wales as well as some areas of significant deprivation. It ranges from the prosperous suburbs of Cyncoed to the estates of Pentwyn and Llanedeyrn, and the inner-city area of Adamsdown, which is an EU objective 2 area owing to the levels of deprivation there. Cardiff is an amazing city that is becoming progressively younger, increasingly ethnically diverse, and more and more vibrant. My constituency has five mosques, two synagogues, numerous churches and chapels and two Sikh gurdwaras, and an amazing choice of food in the local restaurants and shops as a result.

There are four universities in Cardiff, three of which are in my constituency. Cardiff, Central has one of the largest—if not the largest—student populations in the UK. It has almost 16,000 students, who significantly enhance the economic and cultural life of Cardiff, Central, particularly with the Royal Welsh college of music and drama at its heart.

Not surprisingly, Cardiff, Central covers the city centre, with all the economic and cultural opportunity that that brings. I am fortunate in that, unlike some Members before me, I do not have to talk about the interesting sights just outside my constituency. In Cardiff, Central, we have Cardiff castle and Cathays park, representing Cardiff's history, and the jewel of Roath park, with its magnificent lake and memorial to Captain Scott. Unusually for a city seat, we are also fortunate enough to have a ribbon of parks running for miles, almost from one side of the constituency to the other.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have impressive new modern buildings in the city centre. They include the Millennium stadium, which has brought huge economic and social benefits to the city. As many will know, the FA cup final was held there last weekend—probably for the last time for a while, unfortunately. One of the biggest advantages of hosting such sporting events is that they encourage people who would otherwise never come to Wales to visit Cardiff. I have lost count of the number of times that friends and acquaintances, following trips to the Millennium stadium, have said to me in tones of great surprise, "Cardiff's really nice, isn't it?" A unique selling point that sets Cardiff, Central apart from every other constituency in Wales is the fact that it does not have a single sheep in it.

Looking ahead, I am passionate about campaigning on the issues that matter to my constituents and, as part of the official Opposition in Wales, I hope to be able to make a real difference. The rebanding of council tax has hit many residents of Cardiff, Central extremely hard. More and more people want to live in my constituency—presumably because it is now Liberal Democrat—and house prices have risen disproportionately. Nine out of 10 people in the area in which I live have seen their houses go up by at least one council tax band—indeed, my house has gone up by two. Seven out of 10 people in my constituency will have to pay significantly more tax, just as a result of the rebanding. I will do all that I can to raise the concerns of my constituents on this issue and to work towards a fairer alternative, namely the local income tax.

One of the other great concerns during the election was the state of the local health service. We have some of the longest waiting lists in Europe and the hospitals in Cardiff are creaking under the strain. Recently, the main hospital in Wales—the Heath hospital in Cardiff—had to close the doors of its accident and emergency unit for 14 hours. Ranks of ambulances full of waiting patients are not an uncommon sight outside the A and E. The situation has worsened over recent years, primarily as a result of the introduction of the Care Standards Act 2000. Over the past five years, almost every nursing home in my constituency has closed, leaving Cardiff with 200 too few nursing home beds and 200 too many people in hospital beds. The local council is working hard with the local health board and the Welsh Assembly to secure investment in new nursing homes, and I will do what I can to help them.

As we would expect in a constituency with so many students, tuition fees and top-up fees are a huge issue, and not only for the young people themselves. Many parents, grandparents and employers have expressed their opposition to fees, and I only hope that the Welsh Assembly Government take on board the majority view among Assembly Members, which is opposed to variable fees.

I have been given lots of pieces of advice over the past few weeks, some more helpful than others. One letter from a constituent really struck a chord, however. People in Cardiff, Central have long memories, and the letter harked back to Jon Owen Jones's predecessor, the Conservative MP Ian Grist. One paragraph read:

> "If you are half as good as our old MP, Ian Grist, then that will do for me. Ian Grist was a wonderful MP for Cardiff. He made himself available 3 Saturdays out of 4, and he got things done. Put yourself about in Cardiff and you won't go far wrong."

That is a good piece of advice, and one that I shall endeavour to remember over the next four to five years. If all else fails, I can always fall back on the advice that my mother used to give me, and which is taken from a prayer:

> "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

That is as true in politics as it is in the rest of my life. I can only do my best to follow that advice and, in so doing, I hope to make Cardiff, Central proud.

2.34 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to deliver my maiden speech before the Whitsun recess. I am particularly pleased to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott), because she was one of the first new Members from the other parties whom I met when I came to the House. It is especially pleasing to follow her.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands), for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and for various other constituencies, who delivered their speeches today. I am sure that the House will be much the better for the return of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser). It is

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an honour to serve as the Member of Parliament for Putney, because Putney is my home. Before I talk about the area, however, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Tony Colman. Both as a candidate and now as an MP, I have a huge amount of respect for him. He has been extremely successful not just in politics—he was leader of Merton council before becoming Member of Parliament for Putney—but in business. He helped to found the Topshop chain and certainly did his bit to push forward the UK economy during the '80s.

Tony Colman also delivered a huge amount to the House of Commons. He was a member of the International Development Committee, and he played a key role in ensuring that international development rose rapidly up the political agenda in this country. He spent a great deal of time touring countries to see for himself the issues that people face. Locally in Putney, Tony Colman was an assiduous campaigner on aircraft noise, which is something I shall talk about later. It is of great concern to many constituents, and to my fellow residents who live near the Thames in Putney. He did a huge amount for the constituency, and I wish him well in his future career.

It is perhaps particularly fitting that I deliver my maiden speech today, because we have spent a fair amount of time discussing electoral reform and proportional representation. Many hon. Members will know that Putney was the site of the Putney debates, which took place at the time of the English civil war. Oliver Cromwell and his generals camped in Putney for a while, and they used that time to talk about the future shape of the country and how Parliament should operate. They had a decapitation strategy in place long before the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy) came up with the idea and, dare I say, it was a lot more successful.

If the House will indulge me, I shall talk wistfully about my constituency of Putney. In many respects, the constituency name is a misnomer, because Putney comprises many communities, and like many constituencies in London, it is full of vibrant communities and residents' associations. In summary, Putney can be classed as Putney, Roehampton and Southfields. Putney itself sprang up as a crossing point on the Thames to get from Putney to Fulham, and a vibrant business community has developed on the Upper Richmond and Lower Richmond roads and Putney high street ever since.

I encourage Members to join me in attending the university boat race, which starts in Putney every year. We are blessed with some of the most wonderful open spaces in London on our doorstep. I am delighted that I have about half an acre of Wimbledon common in my patch. We are bordered by Richmond park, so I took a keen interest in the Queen's Speech when the Queen noted that there will be legislation to improve and update the management of common land. As Member of Parliament for Putney, I shall be keen to participate in discussion of the legislation to ensure that it safeguards the open spaces that people in my constituency value so much.

Elsewhere in Putney, we have Southfields, which was established by the Quakers. The Southfields grid is an amazing network of roads that criss-cross one another built many years ago by the Quaker community. An extraordinary sense of community lives on in Southfields today. Earlier this week, I attended the Southfields Grid residents association annual general meeting, which was well attended. It shows that, even now, when people are switching off more and more from politics, at the grass roots, people still want to get involved with their local community and to do everything that they can to fight on its behalf. I look forward, as a Member of Parliament, to joining the Southfields Grid residents association for its yearly carol singing outside Southfields tube station. We raised £300 for the Trinity hospice last year, and I could not decide whether people were giving us money so that they could walk away quickly, or whether they appreciated our carol singing—probably the former rather than the latter.

In my constituency, Roehampton faces perhaps some of the greatest challenges. Although many Members might think that Putney is a leafy London suburb, and in many respects, I believe, it offers the best of London living, combining close proximity to the centre of London with a leafy suburb that is amenable to living in, it contains one of the country's largest council estates. I make the pledge today to residents on the Alton estate that I will work tirelessly with them to address the growing concern of drugs and antisocial behaviour. None of the estates in my constituency are sink estates, and I will make sure, if I do one thing as MP, that none of them become sink estates. We need the Alton estate to be an estate of which people can be proud, and many residents have lived there since it was built in the 1950s. I will work with them to make it a place that they can remain proud to call home.

There is much of which to be proud elsewhere in my constituency. In this time of much protracted discussion about health care reform, I have on my patch a world-class hospital, the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability in West Hill, which has done incredible research and provides outstanding care to patients with some of the most challenging neurological and physical medical conditions in the country. It is an independent hospital providing outstanding treatment to NHS patients, of whom its staff take so much care. We should therefore be conscious that local health care can deliver an amazing service outside of the NHS but working with NHS patients. If for no other reason, we must get rid of the political dogma that people who care about health care work only in the NHS. There are many such people in this country who work in independent trusts and charitable foundations such as the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability.

I and my constituents are extremely concerned about many issues, however. Although I recognise that there are now police community support officers across the country, and increasing numbers of fully trained officers, that is not the case in my area of Wandsworth. Over the past eight years, since the current Administration came to power, we have seen fewer police. It is vital that we work together to put more trained officers, who can arrest people, back on the streets of my constituency, and above all, in places such as the Alton estate, which is increasingly blighted by antisocial behaviour.

The District line also raises issues, which the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands) has already discussed. As the only tube line feeding my

area, on which many of my constituents depend to get to work every day, it is vital that it runs safely and reliably. It is also vital that something called public transport, which, clearly, the District line is, is accessible to the public. I always joke that one must practically abseil down the steps into Southfields station in winter, but it is impossible for women with prams and the elderly to use the steps. We must address that as a matter of urgency.

Finally, aircraft noise is an issue, which I have mentioned. My predecessor worked assiduously to help to ban night flights and I will continue that fight and work with other Members who are similarly affected by the issue. It is high time that we recognised that, as with the development of the green belt, a balance needs to be found between quality of life and the noise with which people who live close to airports must put up day to day. We simply cannot continue to develop Heathrow until it bursts at the seams. At some point, we must draw a line in the sand and say, "Thus far and no further." I believe we have reached that line and, in many respects, crossed it.

When I became the candidate in Putney, I was told that it was a bellwether seat. Perhaps I am living proof that that may not be true, as I am the first Opposition Member of Parliament for Putney for several decades. One of the things that I have already learned during my time in politics is that, although people may be on different sides of the political fence, no political party in the country has a monopoly on good intentions. I will therefore do my best to contribute to the House through strong debate, which I think produces strong legislation that will deliver for people outside the Chamber—people in the country who depend absolutely on the quality of the work done here every day on their behalf.

I hope that I can play my full role here over the coming years, both in the Chamber and in the Committees that support it. I will do my utmost to be the very best constituency Member that I can be for Putney, Roehampton and Southfields, and I look forward to the coming years of debate with Members who are present today.

2.46 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I begin by congratulating my fellow Members who have already made their maiden speeches so well today. The first was the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil), who made an excellent contribution. Fortunately, the constituencies of those who followed him were somewhat easier to pronounce. We heard from the hon. Members for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) and for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne), the hon. Members for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands), the hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser)—who, unusually, had the opportunity to make a second maiden speech—my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott), and the hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening). I enjoyed listening to all of them.

It is a great privilege for me to represent East Dunbartonshire, where I was raised and where I have lived for most of my life. The seat has many distinguished constituents, not least the Speaker of this very House. I am looking forward to getting to grips with my constituents' inquiries and problems. Mr. Speaker has welcomed new Members to the House, helpfully offering advice and a listening ear. I am in the fortunate position of being able to reciprocate. Whether the problem is antisocial neighbours, harassment at work or difficulty with a landlord, my door is always open.

East Dunbartonshire stands out among constituencies for electing women in their 20s. The last young woman to represent it was Margaret Bain. Her maiden speech was described by William Hamilton, then Member of Parliament for Fife, Central, as

"a rare treat highly charged with non-controversial subjects."—[*Official Report*, 6 November 1974; Vol. 880, c. 1144.]

Perfect, I thought: no doubt it would be a helpful guide for me. Imagine my surprise when, reading the speech, I came across Mrs. Bain's call for the resignation of the Secretary of State for Scotland. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths) may be pleased to learn that I plan to be less controversial today.

The current boundaries of my constituency contain much of what was formerly Strathkelvin and Bearsden, and part of the old Clydebank and Milngavie seat. Tony Worthington, who stood down at the recent election, gave long service to the community of Milngavie. I pay particular tribute to his hard work on international development. John Lyons was also active in promoting international issues. As Member of Parliament for Strathkelvin and Bearsden, he kick-started a local campaign for East Dunbartonshire to pursue fair trade status. I know that John will be pleased that his efforts are paying off and that a steering group is working towards making East Dunbartonshire a fair trade zone by 2006.

Both those former Labour Members should also be congratulated on their principled stance in opposing the Iraq war. The ability to put conscience and constituency views before the view of the party is valued by members of the public, even if it is less popular with the Whips.

Having mentioned Labour and SNP former representatives of my constituency, I should point out that the Conservatives also held the seat: it was represented by Sir Michael Hirst in the 1980s. In the Scottish Parliament, the Independent Dr. Jean Turner represents Strathkelvin and Bearsden. It was about time that a Liberal Democrat was elected. I am delighted to be the first Liberal Democrat to represent East Dunbartonshire, and also the first Liberal Democrat Member in west central Scotland since Roy Jenkins represented Glasgow, Hillhead.

East Dunbartonshire sits just to the north of Glasgow, stretching from the city boundaries to the foot of the beautiful Campsie fells. I may be accused of bias, but I believe that it is a fantastic place to live. The distinct areas that make up East Dunbartonshire retain a strong sense of community spirit. Situated just 20 minutes from the bustling cosmopolitan city centre of Glasgow and a similarly short distance from the lush beauty of Loch Lomond, it really does enjoy the best of both worlds. Hence it is a lovely place to visit, and I encourage hon. Members to do so, though perhaps not with the purpose that several right hon. Labour Members had when they visited earlier this year.

[Jo Swinson]

People have been visiting for centuries. In 141 AD, the Romans arrived. They found the place so pleasing that they thought there was no need to go further north. Indeed, they built the Antonine wall through the constituency with forts in Bearsden, Cadder and Kirkintilloch. Bearsden was even treated to a Roman bathhouse.

The retention and protection of the vibrant community spirit in East Dunbartonshire will be a high priority for me. Central to strong communities are good local services, which is why I have been particularly concerned at the recent closures of post offices in local areas such as Bearsden, Westerton and Auchinairn. In Bishopbriggs, the main post office has been under threat, although I am now optimistic that, thanks to the support of thousands of local people, the facility will be kept in the town centre. Post offices often act as hubs for the community and a trip to the post office is about so much more than just making a transaction. Such social contact forms part of the glue that binds communities together.

Economic regeneration can also support communities. Kirkintilloch, part of which is in my constituency, is looking forward to a multi-million pound regeneration project that will deliver a state-of-the-art leisure centre by 2007, an arts and culture centre, a health centre and better access to the countryside. A new marina on the Forth and Clyde canal will help to cement Kirkintilloch's reputation as the canal capital of Scotland.

My home town, Milngavie, attracts visitors from all over the world keen to embark on a challenging and dramatic long-distance walk. The west highland way begins in Milngavie and finishes 95 miles further on in Fort William, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Mr. Kennedy). I was delighted to welcome him last month to the start of the west highland way, where we spoke with one of the many active local community groups, the Bearsden and Milngavie ramblers. Next month, the west highland way is celebrating its 25th anniversary—it is almost as old as I am.

Although I may, just, be older than the west highland way, I follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather) in being the youngest Member of this House. I am delighted that among the new faces in the House there are several young MPs. It is a strength that the elected Members span a spectrum of 55 years in age. A more representative House can help to make politics more relevant to the electorate that we serve.

Many people feel disconnected from politics, and nowhere is that more apparent than among young people. Addressing that will take a bit more than baseball caps and text messages. I argue that there is not a general lack of interest in politics, but rather a lack of faith in the political process and in us politicians to address the issues that people care about. People want to know why millions are dying from treatable diseases in Africa, and they want the world to stop sleep-walking into future environmental disaster. Britain's leadership of the G8 later this year will be a key test for many people who are still prepared to give politics a chance.

I am thrilled and honoured that the voters of East Dunbartonshire have chosen to give me a chance as their elected representative. I am determined to represent all of my constituents tirelessly, whatever their politics and even if they do not happen to be the Speaker of this House.

2.54 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): May I first say how much I enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson)? Age is obviously no barrier to being a successful and fine speaker in this House, but it is something of a surprise to follow someone many years younger than one's children. She made a fine speech. I have only ever been to Kirkintilloch in her constituency and that was a brief visit.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): That is enough.

Kelvin Hopkins: A fellow Scot speaks from the Back Benches.

Other new Members made equally trenchant and interesting speeches, some laced with humour as well as intelligence. I did not agree with every point raised but, surprisingly, I agreed with quite a few, even though they were made by Opposition Members.

I made a late entry into the Chamber this afternoon, but not just to avoid having to pronounce the name of that wonderful constituency in the west of Scotland, which I shall have to learn before too long. I was fortunate in arriving late for that reason, but my main purpose is to deliver the speech that I wanted to make in the Queen's Speech debates but was unable to do so, largely because so many fine new Members were making their maiden speeches. It was enjoyable and interesting to hear them yesterday. I want to raise some fairly serious points about the economy, so my remarks are addressed mainly to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I know that the Deputy Leader of the House is one of his close friends, so perhaps he will put in a good word for me after he has heard my speech.

Support for the Government has rested largely on our success with the economy. We have had strong and steady growth for eight years and unemployment has fallen to astonishingly low levels. We have had buoyant house prices and rising public spending, all of which has brought dividends and contributed to two further substantial election victories. We must ensure that our economic record continues in order to win fourth and perhaps even fifth terms in office. The benign economic environment has meant that voters, particularly Labour voters, have forgiven the Government for other less popular policies. Even I have disagreed with Ministers and the Government on some issues. The Iraq war has already been mentioned, but when people came to vote, they put the pound in their pockets, their jobs, their secure homes and their schools and hospitals first in their reckoning. That is precisely what they did at the last election.

In Luton, North, my support depends strongly on my constituents' reaction to what they experienced under the Conservative Government 12 to 14 years ago. That

is because my constituency was then the epicentre of negative equity and repossessions. It was the No. 1 constituency in that respect, and my constituents have not forgotten it. That folk memory continues to this day and will serve us well in future years, though I do not want to rest only on the bad record of our Conservative predecessors. We need to be proud of the good things that we do, too.

We must keep the economy strong. The truth is that we are now facing rather more difficult times. Forecasts have been made in the newspapers both today and yesterday of the difficult times that lie ahead unless we take appropriate action. Growth has long been driven primarily by consumer spending and economic demand. That has been based, in turn, on rising asset values. Since the collapse of the exchange rate mechanism in 1992, house prices have risen and there has been a surge in stock market values. Growth was so strong that it accommodated a substantial appreciation of sterling in the late 1990s—much to my surprise, I must say, because I had thought that such an appreciation would damage economic growth. That did not happen and we sailed through it, just as we sailed through a sharp fall in the stock market subsequently.

Such events may have been expected to throw us off course, but the economy has continued to grow. House prices have been the basic reason for that. As they have continued to rise, so have the asset values that matter to most people—their own homes. Particularly for working people, the price of their house is more significant than the state of the stock market. That is not true of other countries, but it is certainly true of Britain. House prices have now reached a point at which the ratio between earnings and house prices is twice that of 10 years ago. Such a surge cannot continue indefinitely and demand must derive from other sectors.

The Government—the Chancellor, in particular—have done well in driving public spending ahead, especially in health and education. That has brought benefits in employment as well as economic growth. I urge the Chancellor to continue with his public spending programme to ensure that we have not only social benefits, but the economic benefits of full employment.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the main consequences of the incredible inflation of house prices is the lack of affordable housing in this country? Does he also agree that it is now urgent for hon. Members on both sides of the House to find some methodology whereby new entrants to the housing market could afford to buy their properties? Perhaps we should also revisit the opportunity to increase the stock of rental housing in the council sector.

Kelvin Hopkins: I largely agree with that, and I and other Labour Members who belong to the parliamentary council housing group have urged the Government to build council houses in the traditional way, to provide decent homes for working people who cannot—or who do not choose to—own their own homes.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, but I am sure that he will agree that the rate of construction of affordable housing fell dramatically after 1997. Had this country continued to build affordable housing at the pre-1997 rate, our housing stock for people who cannot afford to buy their own homes would now be several hundred thousand greater than it is at present.

Kelvin Hopkins: Even before 1997, the rate of house building was too low. Over decades, Conservative Governments provided heavy subsidies for council house sales, which led to a depletion of the housing stock that has caused terrible problems in my constituency. I have urged the Government to put a brake on council house sales in Luton, but so far without success. I think that such a brake is essential, and that council house sales must be conducted according to their market value rather than their subsidised value. Even then, the proceeds should be used to provide other houses for renting in the same area.

The housing crisis is serious, as the Government now recognise. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has talked about how the problem might be tackled, but helping more people become owner-occupiers without increasing the housing stock is not the solution. The result of that might only be still further house price inflation, when what we really want is more stock, as the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) rightly said. We need more houses in the right areas, and more in the public rented sector available for people who cannot afford to buy.

Patrick Hall (Bedford) (Lab): The only way to make houses more affordable is to build more, so that people have more choice. Does my hon. Friend agree that those hon. Members representing the Government's allocated growth areas who do not mind about having more houses elsewhere, but who do not want them in their constituencies, are not seriously addressing an issue that is as relevant to their constituents as it is to ours?

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, whose constituency is in the same county as mine. I am aware of the problem that he describes. In the borough of Luton, we are running out of land suitable for new housing. We will have to expand if we are to provide decent homes for the thousands of families in my constituency who need them. That is the number one crisis in my area, as is evidenced every week in my surgery.

I did not want to be sidetracked into a long debate about housing, but rising house prices—

Mr. Love: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kelvin Hopkins: Yes, indeed.

Mr. Love: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, as I want to sidetrack him in a slightly different direction. He suggests that we should build more council accommodation, which would require a significant increase in Government borrowing unless other areas of public expenditure were to be reduced. What is his assessment of the likely impact on the economy of that increase in borrowing?

Kelvin Hopkins: Borrowing for investment is separate from borrowing to finance the economic cycle, which

[Kelvin Hopkins]

goes to pay for unemployment and so on. As long as the borrowing can be funded—from rents, or possibly Government subsidy—there is no problem. Gross borrowing is at very low levels, and long-term interest rates are low, which makes borrowing cheap. A difficulty might arise if the economy and the construction sector were to overheat, as that might cause the building of more houses to lead to prices being bid up. We must therefore ensure that houses can be built without overheating.

Mr. Love: The reputation of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is built on his fiscal rules. The sustainable investment rule, which deals with borrowing for investment rather than for current expenditure, is universally recognised to be very tight. Would not an increase in borrowing risk breaking that rule, and pose a challenge to the Chancellor's reputation?

Kelvin Hopkins: I do not think so, but I might have a debate with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor about it. We should perhaps have a higher level of gross borrowing. We have low levels by international standards, and provided that he borrows for investment and it is fundable—in the sense of the return on the borrowing—it would not be a problem. If one simply wanted to borrow for current spending, it might be a problem and could lead to budget deficits and even inflation. One has to keep current spending at an appropriate level. However, borrowing for investment in the long term, provided it can be funded, is not a problem. It is important to separate current spending and capital spending when it comes to borrowing limits.

The house price surge has started to reach its limits. People are warier about borrowing against the rising value of their houses, and that is inevitable. We pull in our horns when we think that house prices might not rise much more. We say, "Well, we'll put off buying the car this year and we won't have so many meals out." We can choose not to spend, but if we all did that, we could quickly move into a recession or at least an economic slowdown. That is what we have to avoid, and we should look to the instruments of macroeconomic policy to ensure that economic demand is sustained in the long term at an appropriate level to maintain employment levels and growth. Those instruments are monetary policy, fiscal policy and the exchange rate.

On monetary policy, the chief economist at Capital Economics said that the Bank of England will soon have to cut rates below the 2003 record low of 3.5 per cent. to ensure that monetary policy is not too tight. I was a little concerned when the Chancellor chose to reduce the target for the RPI(X) measure of inflation from 2.5 per cent. to 2 per cent. I see nothing wrong in raising that target to 2.5 per cent. again as a 0.5 per cent. inflation difference is not significant compared with the inflation rates that we have had in the past. If the economy would be damaged by keeping the target at 2 per cent., but would be healthier if it were 2.5 per cent., I would choose a 2.5 per cent. target. The record of interest rates since 1997 shows that the average level of inflation—the RPI(X)—over that period is about 2.5 per cent. It is certainly nearer 2.5 per cent. than 2 per cent. We have had a strong economy in that period and there is nothing fundamentally wrong in having a slightly higher inflation target. We became terrified of inflation because of high rates, but the era of high inflation is long past. The economy is not now naturally inflation prone and we could easily adjust the tight inflation targets slightly.

The second instrument is fiscal policy. As the economy moves into recession—if we are approaching that part of the cycle—it is natural to spend more. Indeed, one has to spend more if unemployment starts to rise and tax revenues start to fall. It is a natural tendency to spend more during that period, but I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to use public spending, as we have traditionally done in the past, to ensure that the economy keeps growing and unemployment stays low. We have been petrified of public spending because it did get out of control when we had high levels of unemployment in serious recessions. We had two such recessions during the period of Conservative Government and, inevitably, public spending got out of control. It is inevitable because the unemployed have to be looked after and tax revenues collapse. We are not in that situation now and I urge the Chancellor to use public spending wisely as a tool to ensure that we keep the economy growing.

Finally I come to the exchange rate. Fortunately we are not in the eurozone, so we can adjust our exchange rate to meet the needs of our economy. The exchange rate is too high. The evidence for that is our structural trade deficit. If it is permanent and goes on year after year, something is wrong with the exchange rate: the price at which we sell our exports and the price we pay for our imports. We have reached the point when we should think seriously about intervening in the markets to bring down the exchange rate relative particularly to other developed nations.

There is much talk about competitiveness. It can be affected by many factors, but above all by the exchange rate. If the exchange rate is, for example, 20 per cent. too high, clearly one is less competitive. I believe that it is too high and we should now intervene. There are techniques of intervention that could bring down the exchange rate, which were suggested by, among others, Gerald Holtham, former director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, such as intervening in the bond markets.

Our great advantage in fiscal policy, monetary policy and the exchange rate is that we have control over our own economy. That is because we are not a member of the eurozone. The Chancellor has been wise to steer us clear of it for eight years. During the general election the Prime Minister said that he thought it unlikely that we would join during this Parliament. Even he has accepted that it is not sensible. It is certainly not possible because people will never vote for it.

Our economy is relatively strong compared with that of Germany, which has the opposite problem. It cannot control its economy because it has no control over its macroeconomic levers. If it could disentangle itself from the euro and operate those levers, it could recover and perhaps even build a healthy economy like ours, with full employment and strong growth. Indeed, if I were a Back-Bench social democratic member of the Bundestag, I would urge the Chancellor to disentangle Germany from the euro and re-establish the deutschmark. It would be a sensible policy and can be done.

Currencies can be separated. There is evidence for it. When the Czech Republic and Slovakia were set up as separate countries, they established separate currencies. They varied their values with each other. A closer example is the Irish punt. It used to be tied rigidly to the pound, but then it became a separate currency and now Ireland has the euro. There is absolutely no reason why the German economy could not disentangle itself from the euro. Understandably, there would be certain political ramifications. It would cause a few shockwaves round Europe, but the policy would be a sensible one. If Germany had a strong economy again, the whole of Europe would be stronger economically. It might even have an economy as strong as that which has been built on the good sense of our Chancellor of the Exchequer.

3.13 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker for calling me to make my maiden speech. I pay tribute to the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today, all of which have been of a high quality. While I may be the last, I will try my best not to be least.

It has been a busy week for me. As well as the sittings of Parliament, I have attended two sittings of Leeds City council. If I get confused, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and refer to you as my lord mayor, I hope that you will forgive me on this occasion.

I am delighted to be in these new surroundings although, if I may dare say so, in some ways they compare less favourably with those of Leeds civic hall. The behaviour there is marginally better than here, from what I have seen so far; maiden speeches are always delivered to a packed Chamber; and, best of all, we always have a break for tea at about 6 pm. In addition, in the chamber in Leeds I have my own chair, in which no one else can sit, and I have access to an electronic voting system. Leeds has all the mod cons but, having experienced voting in this place for the first time yesterday, I am sure that the system here is at least more fun and certainly looks better on television.

If I may, let me take you back, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to my first visit to the House, back in 1987, as an idealistic A-level politics student. I vividly remember the huge excitement when the then Prime Minister swooshed in, followed by the Ministers and various MPs whom we recognised, and of course we were captivated for the 20 minutes of Prime Minister's Question Time. However, not knowing the procedure in those days—I confess that I still do not—we were very surprised when the Prime Minister and all the Ministers swooshed out again after 20 minutes, and we then had to sit through about an hour and a half of a forestry debate. An hour of a forestry debate may not have been enough to deter me from wanting to take my place in the House, but I have to say that none of my colleagues who were with me that day has shown any interest. All I can say is that if my party leader comes to me, asking me whether I wish to take up a spokespersonship on forestry matters, he might be surprised by the vociferousness of my refusal.

Luckily, in my seat of Leeds, North-West we do not have much in the way of forestry, but please do not be mistaken, as many people are, into assuming that it is therefore an urban seat. In fact, I am very proud to represent an extraordinarily diverse seat that consists of urban and suburban communities, as well as large amounts of farmland and beautiful countryside, which make up more than half of the constituency.

In Leeds, North-West we have inner-city areas, suburbs, villages and farms, and we have the delightful mediaeval market town of Otley, above which is the very fine hill of Otley Chevin, said to offer the finest view in Leeds. I was lucky enough to spend the new year's eve moment of this year on that spot, wondering what might happen to me this year, so obviously my dreams have been realised.

In Leeds, North-West we have a rather peculiar boast: we have one international airport and only half a railway station. That is because only half of Burley Park railway station lies in the constituency. Public transport is an issue, but not the railways; I will talk about that later. I represent Headingley ward both as a Member and as a councillor, and it is home to Headingley stadium. In that context, I must pay tribute to the Leeds Rhinos rugby league team, which in the past year was crowned as super league champions, winning the grand final and then going on to win the world club challenge. In the other code, we are very proud to have seen Leeds Tykes lift the Powergen trophy against Bath. It certainly has been a significant year of celebration for many of us in Leeds. All I can say is that perhaps I can be a little bit grateful that, unlike in the 1997 election, the mascot of Leeds Rhinos, Ronnie the Rhino, chose not to stand this time.

Unlike many of the big cities such as Manchester, Birmingham or Liverpool, we do not use the name of an area for Leeds, North-West because there is no area that could claim to be the notable area of my seat. Indeed, the local Conservative association still has not worked out that the seat is called Leeds, North-West, and its members refer to themselves as North West Leeds Conservatives. But that is something of a faux pas, and one piece of advice I would give hon. Members today is that if they are sending a letter to anyone in Otley, the address is Otley, West Yorkshire—not Otley, Leeds, West Yorkshire.

In such a diverse seat there is really only one thing that unites it. People might say that there are two now that there is a Liberal Democrat MP, but what unites it is the A660, the trunk road that runs from south to north. It is one of the top 10 congested roads in the country and a problem for all of us who try to use or avoid it. That is why the need for the Leeds supertram system is so very pressing. At present nothing is being done to address the ever-worsening problems of congestion, because we are still waiting for a decision from the Secretary of State for Transport. I must use this opportunity to urge that he make a decision as soon as possible, and I hope sincerely that it will be a positive one.

The last Liberal MP to represent part of Leeds, North-West was David Austick, who won the Ripon by-election back in 1973. I pay tribute to David, who has since passed away. He was an honorary alderman of the city of Leeds and is still held in very high esteem. He did, however, hold his seat only until February 1974, so I am certainly confident that I can be the MP for the constituency longer than he was.

I must, of course, pay warm tribute to my predecessor, Harold Best. Mr. Best announced that it was his intention to retire at the general election some

[Greg Mulholland]

years ago—indeed, before I was selected to stand for election to the seat—and I would not have wanted to stand against Mr. Best, for he was an MP who had the courage to stand up for his principles and, indeed, to stand up against his Government on many occasions.

I have heard it said that, when Harold Best was first elected, his name featured on a list of newly elected MPs suspected of being possibly troublesome that was held at Labour headquarters at Millbank. I wonder whether I am on a similar list, and all I can say is that, if not, I will do all that I can to rectify that. Indeed, Harold obliged his reputation by waiting only until December 1997 before rebelling for the first time—in that case, against the lone parent benefit cuts.

Harold worked hard locally and campaigned on many of the same issues as my council colleagues in Leeds, North-West and I have done. In Parliament, he voted in the Lobby with my colleagues on several occasions. So it would indeed have seemed strange to oppose someone who consistently opposed the very things that I have been railing against: the great battles of the last Parliament—the war in Iraq and university top-up fees—and, of course, the great battle of this one, identity cards. I pledge to my constituents that I will continue those fights with vigour.

Harold Best's reputation was earned not in the House, but as a hard-working local MP, and I intend to emulate him in that and do my very best to represent the people of Leeds, North-West. Mr. Best did not lose the election in Leeds, North-West, and his reputation remains intact—a proud and distinguished one that I am honoured to follow.

Before I conclude, I wish to mention briefly a couple of issues that I have been charged by my constituents to bring to the House. There has been much talk in the Queen's Speech debate about the economy, but one thing that is abundantly clear in my constituency is that, although the economy is performing well generally, the prosperity that it generates is not being shared adequately or equitably.

First, for older people, we still have a pensions system that leaves huge numbers of the poorest pensioners without the money that they need to get an income that simply lifts them to the breadline. Free personal care is still not regarded as a right, despite the finding of the royal commission.

Of course, at the younger end of the spectrum, many sixth-formers in my constituency are being put off going to university through the fear of the huge debts that the funding system now inevitably involves. We have something like 20,000 students in Leeds, North-West. I have a duty to continue to criticise the decisions that have seen the Government pull up the ladder of opportunity that they themselves were privileged to use without being saddled with a huge burden of debt.

Although there are other local issues that I want to raise, I must mention my commitment to the cause of the global community and global justice. With my role as a campaigner for the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development and the wonderful umbrella organisation, TIDAL, which stands for Trade, Injustice and Debt Action Leeds, together in 2004, we were proud to make Leeds the biggest fair-trade city in this country. Indeed, I felt that I had to mention my commitment to international development, and I hope that the House and the Government continue to put that issue high on the agenda and to support the Make Poverty History campaign, particularly with the G8 summit coming up.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech today. The idealistic young man who came here in 1987 has indeed now entered the House as a Member of Parliament, and I hope that I have not lost the idealistic zeal that encouraged me to want to enter the House and play a part in its business. I pledge, both to my constituents in Leeds, North-West and to all hon. Members, that I will play my full part in being the Member of Parliament for Leeds, North-West both in my constituency and here in the House.

3.24 pm

Patrick Hall (Bedford) (Lab): I congratulate all the Members who have spoken in the debate, especially those who gave their maiden speeches today. They brought to life the places they represent in a way that almost makes me want to visit those areas, but I am happy with the constituency of Bedford and Kempston that I have the honour to represent. The maiden speeches we have heard showed a remarkable balance of clarity, humanity and intelligence. We have certainly heard generosity, too, from several speakers, including the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) in his remarks about Harold Best, who was one of the kindest people I met in the House and will be much missed.

I apologise for not being in the Chamber from the beginning of the debate. Prior business prevented me from being in my place, but I have listened to several speeches during the last hour or so.

I had hoped to make the contribution that I am about to make during the debates on the Queen's Speech, although it is understandable that I was unable to do so due to the need to give priority to maiden speeches. I want to talk about council tax, an issue of considerable and growing concern to most of the people I represent, and one that the Government are determined to tackle.

Although specific legislation was not brought forward in the Queen's Speech, I have no doubt that in the months ahead the House will spend much time talking about council tax, revaluation and the recommendations of the Lyons review of the financing of local councils. I am sure that I am not the only Member who is eagerly awaiting a special Christmas present—the publication of the Lyons review. I understand that it is on schedule to report, as required, by December.

Although concern about council tax is expressed throughout the country, it is understandably acute in Bedford and Kempston and throughout Bedfordshire. Band D council tax in Bedford is now £1,323.71, having risen 81 per cent. from £731 in 1997. Despite the fact that Bedfordshire county council has received a real-terms increase of 33 per cent. in Government grant since 1997, in stark contrast to the real-terms cut of 7 per cent. during the last four years under the Conservatives, it has managed to become the third-highest taxing authority in the country. To compound that felony, the council has been found consistently to be the worst performing. From being judged "poor" in the comprehensive

performance assessment, it has now made some recovery to "weak". Its children's services have been placed under special measures and a few days ago Ofsted found that its youth services were unsatisfactory on all counts.

Kelvin Hopkins: As I am from the same county, my hon. Friend's remarks are of interest. Does he agree that Luton was extremely wise to separate itself as a unitary authority?

Patrick Hall: As a former member of Bedfordshire county council, I confess to some sadness when Luton took that step eight years ago, but I can understand why it did so. For people living in Bedfordshire, that draws attention to the potential advantages of unitary authorities rather than to the situation we face at district and county council level.

The county council is run with a rod of iron by the Conservative party. For the past eight years, until the recent elections, the ruling Conservative group had only a small majority, yet it refused to allocate places on the executive and other structures to the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups. The poor performance and high taxing of Bedfordshire is thus entirely down to the Conservatives. They can blame no other group, and certainly not the council staff. The Conservative group in Bedfordshire bears full responsibility for what is happening, so guess what happened at the county council elections three weeks ago? The demonstrably failed Conservative group, which had increased its overall majority from one in 1997 to three in 2001, was gratefully rewarded by the people of Bedfordshire for being pretty useless by an increase in its majority to 20.

Surely that is one of the most bizarre election results of all time. Perhaps Bedfordshire Conservatives could let us into their secret. Do they have a Blarney stone hidden in the bowels of county hall, or do they perform the darks arts in some way to mask what they have really done to the people of Bedfordshire? I add in haste, however, that the people of Bedford and Kempston did not come under that spell to the same extent as those elsewhere in the county. In the constituency that I have the honour to represent there are only three Conservative county councillors out of 11, and six of them are Labour. The residents of Bedford and Kempston understand that the council tax is a Tory tax made worse by a Tory council. They also understand that a Labour Government are most likely to bring about the necessary changes in the funding of local councils and to make funding fairer, more transparent and more effective.

Although a high-taxing authority such as Bedfordshire county council puts an added burden on local residents, it has to be said that there are systemic weaknesses with the council tax itself, and I shall now turn to those. First, it is inherently regressive and that is reflected in the fact that although a person on band H pays three times more than someone on band A, the band H property is valued at eight times more than the property on band A.

Secondly, there is the gearing effect due to the fact that the council tax raises about 26 per cent. of local council budgets. That means that if a council wishes to raise its budget by an extra 1 per cent. from the council tax, the tax has to go up by about 4 per cent. Above-inflation increases are very difficult to avoid and will always tend to make the council tax stand out as a big tax unless we make radical changes.

Kelvin Hopkins: Does my hon. Friend agree that the gearing problem could, to some extent, be overcome if the Government chose to return a business rate to local authorities?

Patrick Hall: Indeed, I am just about to come to that, because it follows logically from what I have just said. My hon. Friend picked that point up instantly. The business rate is the one area of radical change that we could consider and make. I hope that the Lyons review will come up with a careful assessment of that possibility.

The business rate was nationalised by the Conservative Government in 1990, and that leaves the domestic council tax payers as the only significant source of revenue open to the decision of local councils. Even that is constrained by Government capping powers, and I would like to mention them. I was a councillor in the past, but I would not attempt to be a councillor and a Member of Parliament at the same time. That is a matter for the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West to resolve in the weeks and months ahead. Good for him if he can do it.

I am uncomfortable with capping. I believe that decisions about locally raised revenue are best taken locally and that, if levels of local taxation are judged to be excessive by local people, the local electorate should cap the councillors by booting them out of office. That is the best way to deal with the issue. However, in exceptional circumstances, I accept that there may be a need to use reserve powers and that what I have said does not appear to apply to the people of Bedfordshire as a whole who continue to return Conservatives to the county council.

When the business rate was nationalised, it was pegged to inflation, but the council tax was not. Therefore, over the years, the share of local council budgets carried by businesses and local residents has shifted significantly on to the shoulders of residents. While the business rate contribution has dropped from 29 to 22 per cent. over the past 12 or 13 years, that from council tax has increased from 20 to 26 per cent. In effect, that means that the council tax payer is subsidising the business ratepayer, a situation that is unfair and unsustainable. We need to address that.

It makes sense to return the business rate to local councils if we want a fair share of the cost of local council services to be paid and to reduce the gearing effect, although that would not be an automatic panacea.

Mr. Love: My hon. Friend's argument is a little inconsistent. Surely the problem with the business rate is that it has been pegged to inflation. It would not be necessary to abolish the unified business rate because we could simply urge business to pay its proper proportion to achieve what he wants.

Patrick Hall: It would be difficult for a centrally determined level of business rates to take account of the

[Patrick Hall]

varying conditions throughout the country with which locally elected councils deal. If we want councils to play a strong role in our civic society, there must be some scope for variation because otherwise they lack the power to do what we want them to. I am not in favour of a nationally applied rate because it leads to the situation in which we demonstrably find ourselves, with the burden unfairly carried.

Re-localising the business rate would not be an automatic solution to the problems of the council tax. There would have to be understanding and support from the business community. I also think that a measure of protection would be needed because although residents have a vote, businesses do not, so they could reasonably argue that such protection would be needed because there would be no immediate electoral kick-back from a council's decisions to increase the local business rate, as there would be from a council tax increase. We would certainly need to retain a national equalisation mechanism to redistribute business rate yields because they might be high for some councils and low for others. None the less, on balance there is much to commend in the re-localisation of the business rate.

If property tax is to remain as the source—or indeed a source—of locally raised revenue, which is likely even if we consider the possibility of adding a local sales tax or indeed a local income tax to the armoury as a result of the Lyons review, it is crucial that it is based on accurate information about the value of property. Such information must then be fed into a robust system that can be regularly updated so that revaluation exercises are sensible and effective. The Government have made it clear that the revaluation exercise for England that is about to begin will be revenue-neutral. The value of the council tax bands will be uprated to reflect house price inflation, but that should result in the overwhelming majority of properties remaining in the same band. However, achieving that will pose difficulties due to not only strong regional variations in house prices, but large variations within regions.

I understand why people in England express fears about the possible effects of revaluation because the experience in Wales was that 40 per cent. of properties ended up at least one band higher. We must make it clear that revaluation is not about raising revenue, learn from what happened in Wales and approach the process in a more measured way than was the case there. We have time to get the system right before the new bills hit the doormats in April 2007. I am delighted that the Lyons review is on the case and that it will advise Ministers on this crucial matter.

I ask the Government to be open-minded about options for funding local council services. I hope that they will be prepared to consider changing the number of bands and the possibility of introducing regional variations for both the number of bands and the payment proportions among them. Although it will be controversial, I hope that the Government will be open minded about the re-localisation of the business rate, for the reasons that I mentioned. We also need to ensure that we learn from the Welsh experience and deliver an English revaluation that is revenue-neutral.

Finally, we all need to be clear about the overall purpose of the reform of local council funding. It should be about underpinning and strengthening local government to create a framework in which local government and local democracy flourish and should make a difference to our towns and communities throughout the land. Councillors should be able to respond to the wishes of residents and to have freedoms and responsibilities. That will make the job of being a councillor worth while and, therefore, more likely to attract new people who want to serve their communities in that way, as well as perhaps achieving a higher turnout at local elections. To achieve all that, the way in which councils are funded must be fair and easily understood and funds must be easy to collect.

Surely, if we are to retain a property tax, the aim should be that householders with comparable incomes pay roughly the same local council tax if they live in broadly similar house types anywhere in the country, and there should be a reasonable span of bands nearly everywhere, with band A, for example, applying to houses that are cheap by local rather than national standards. If we do not do that, we will end up keeping and reinforcing the current situation in which 60, 70 or 80-plus per cent. of properties in many northern towns and cities are in band A.

Those are important issues for the Government and Parliament. They are certainly important to my constituents, whose message to me is clear: the current situation cannot be sustained and council tax must be reformed.

3.42 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Whitsun recess, I wish to raise a number of points. First, however, I want to deal with the maiden speeches.

You and I made our maiden speeches in the same year, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I sat two Benches back from the Dispatch Box, on the Government side of the House. On that occasion, it was not possible to find a place to sit, whereas nowadays it is hard to find a Member of Parliament who is available to sit on the green Benches. I also note that the usual courtesies in debates no longer seem to be entirely observed, which is disappointing. No doubt that has all happened via the Modernisation Committee and perhaps I need to understand it a bit more. The best way to deal with that would be to put it on the agenda of the next meeting of the Chairmen's Panel.

The first maiden speech today was by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil)—I shall not pretend to pronounce his constituency correctly. When he began speaking, I did not understand anything he said and thought that it was the usual speech by a colleague. It eventually dawned on me that he was not speaking in English. When he reverted to English and I could understand him, I thought that he made a splendid speech. I am sure that the House looks forward to his contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) also made a splendid speech. He has a loud voice, and my hon. Friends will be in no doubt as to how he stands on things. I am delighted that he paid such a warm and generous tribute to our former

colleague, Dame Marion Roe. My hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) made a remarkable speech without a piece of paper in his hands. I was impressed by his command of the constituency that he represents. He paid a generous and warm tribute to Melanie Johnson, his predecessor, who used to sit on the Labour Benches.

We then heard a speech from the hon. Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne), who again spoke with no notes, although technically he had a piece of paper in his hand. He made a splendid tour of his constituency. It was a shock to most of us when he said that there had been four different Members of Parliament in four elections, but we will not dwell on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) spoke about the normal courtesies of the House, and I very much agreed with what he said about the supremacy of Parliament. I look forward to his contribution on that subject in the years to come. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands) is someone I know well: he happens to be a member of the same dining club as myself, the 1912 club, and he has earned his spurs in winning a place in this House. He will prove to be a splendid MP.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser) is a retread—we were together in one Parliament. As ever, he spoke splendidly. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) that there is nothing wrong with being a retread. I go for economy in motoring and most of my tyres are also retreads.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott) made a splendid speech. Inadvertently, I have become a regular visitor to Cardiff because the various football teams with which I am associated keep turning up at the millennium stadium. I shall refer later to Saturday's match, but so far, we have had no success. Having listened to the hon. Lady's speech, perhaps we will be successful on Saturday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made a stunning speech. When we saw her face on the television on election night, Conservative Members were all greatly cheered up. I noted that she said that she sings carols, and there is an effective group in the House of Commons for her to join. I am sure that, in every sense, she will make a great contribution to the affairs of the House.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) made a splendid speech and paid a warm tribute to her colleagues. The hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) comes to this House with great experience—no one could accuse him of taking a short cut to the House of Commons—and we look forward to hearing from him in the years ahead.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what a joy it is for you and I to listen to new voices. It is a privilege to listen to maiden speeches, as some of us get fed up listening to the same voices. I get particularly fed up listening to my own voice and if my family were to take a vote, they would very much agree.

Traditionally, these debates are about local matters. I am puzzled that, having fought a general election campaign, so few hon. Members are here to raise constituency points. I should have thought that now was the time to deliver on the promises made on the doorstep. I intend to do as is traditional and raise constituency points.

I welcome the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Nigel Griffiths), to his new position. He and I know one another very well: he once borrowed my eldest daughter to introduce her to the leader of his party at the Brit awards, but I shall not hold that against him. He also led her astray by getting her an autograph from the leader of his party, but I shall not hold that against him either.

When the Minister really gets into his job, he will be briefed by his officials that I have continually raised the case of Majid Narwaz. He is one of four British citizens detained—or should I say "banged up"?—in prison in Cairo. The other Members of Parliament who have constituents there are my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), and the hon. Members for East Ham (Mr. Timms) and for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I must tell the Minister, although this is not directed towards him personally, that my patience on this issue has now run out.

My constituent has now been in prison in Cairo for three and a half years, so he has already done three and a half years of a five-year sentence. The members of the Foreign Office team who have been dealing with this case are very courteous and, no doubt, when the Minister responds he will reassure the House that Ministers have done everything that they possibly can on the issue. Well, I am no longer convinced that they have been terribly effective. Considering the relationship between the Labour leader and President Mubarak, I am certain that, with a bit more tenacity, we could get some real movement on the issue of these four detainees.

When I visited my constituent in prison in Cairo, I found the conditions grim, to say the least. Some of my colleagues would doubtless say that that is as it should be, but I believe that the detainees are not guilty of the crimes of which they are accused and that there has been a great miscarriage of justice. Majid Narwaz is a young man, and his mother came to see me at my surgery on Friday. She advised me that inmates from the prison's criminal wing—not the four British detainees—had smuggled in a mobile telephone and that, as a result, all the inmates had been punished. They were not allowed out of their cells to exercise, and food from their families was not allowed into the prison. The situation is very grim indeed. My constituent is allowed out of his cell for only two hours.

The detainees' families would very much welcome a further meeting with the Foreign Secretary to discuss their welfare, and I urge the Minister and his ministerial colleagues to make representations to the Egyptian Government, so that Majid and the other detainees can return to the UK as soon as possible. This morning, I was delighted to receive a letter from the Egyptian ambassador. I shall not read it all out to the House because I understand that a number of my hon. Friends have received similar letters. The ambassador congratulates me on being re-elected, then goes on to say:

"While I am looking forward to meeting with you soon, I would like to assure you of my readiness to cooperate fully with your goodself in order to enhance further the already excellent existing bilateral relations between our two countries."

[Mr. David Amess]

Marvellous! We are going to get some action on this issue, and the Minister is obviously pushing at an open door.

The next issue that I wish to raise is that of law and enforcement. So many of my colleagues are parroting the chorus that we need 5,000 more police officers. However, it will do no earthly good to have even one extra police officer patrolling our streets unless they know what they are doing. It is ridiculous for people to call for more and more police officers—I know some of my colleagues will grimace: fancy a Conservative Member of Parliament saying that!—when what is needed is a well-managed police force. I am less than reassured that that is the case at the moment. We also want a properly trained police force.

A number of my friends and relatives joined the police, although some of them have left the force. When I learn at first hand about what is happening in the police force, I am very concerned because it seems that whenever an Opposition Member makes a criticism, the fault is always thought to lie with the last Conservative Government in the previous century. However, we have lost too many experienced police officers, who for all sorts of reasons have taken early retirement. That has happened not just in the police service but in the teaching profession and among health professionals. We have lost a huge number of experienced policewomen and policemen, and we are now paying the price for losing all that experience. I suggest to the Minister and to my colleagues that we need more police officers, but we also need common sense. Our police officers should be properly trained.

Mr. Fraser: I do not think that any Opposition Member would disagree with my hon. Friend. We want to ensure that police officers do the job that they are supposed to do in the force, but the bureaucracy put upon them by this Government has prevented them from doing so. As the Conservative party said at the election—and Conservative Members have said the same since—although we want more police officers on the streets, we also want the officers who are there to do the job that they are paid to do.

Mr. Amess: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. The Government's strategy is to have many people in uniform, and the public regard some of them as police officers. Those people's powers of arrest, however, are no more than anyone else's: they can talk to someone and detain them for about half an hour. Such things trouble me greatly.

Recently, I was privileged to attend a charity hair and fashion show in my constituency. Before hon. Members make any jokes, it was organised by "2 Smart 4 Drugs", and led by a police officer called Victoria. I support that strategy absolutely. I unashamedly use this opportunity to persuade the Government that we should invest more in such policing. Drugs misuse is the biggest challenge that we face in this country. The problem is everywhere. One of the causes of offending is undoubtedly the misuse of drugs. When the Labour leader spoke on the first day of the debate on the Gracious Speech, I was appalled by his response to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), who asked about cannabis. If any hon. Member feels that it is all right to take cannabis, I challenge them to sit with me at one of my surgeries, where more often than not I will meet someone or hear about a family member whose life has been destroyed by their taking cannabis. It was a huge mistake by the Government to reclassify cannabis. If their Back Benchers are honest, I think they also feel that way. However, the Labour leader told my hon. Friend that we will wait for an expert report. We are always waiting for reports and consulting people, and I hope that all hon. Members will acknowledge the common-sense notion that taking cannabis is not a good idea.

I therefore very much support "2 Smart 4 Drugs", led by a lady called Pam Withrington, whose aunt, Jo Robinson, tragically lost her son as a result of drug misuse: he was found dead in a flat under terrible circumstances. I challenge Ministers who are not convinced on this point to talk to the victims: people who have lost loved ones as a result of drug misuse. "2 Smart 4 Drugs" has a programme aimed at 11 to 13-year-olds, which has three elements: a game show format packed with drug information; an upbeat current song adapted to have drug information lyrics; and an open discussion session about peer pressure and how to handle a situation in which a mate says that it is all right to take drugs. I applaud that initiative. The organisation is short of funds, and reaches out to the whole of Essex, including the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), for Castle Point and for Braintree (Mr. Newmark), as well as to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk. I hope that the Minister will try to persuade the Home Office to give more funding to that organisation.

We were told that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; in fact, the real threat is from Iran. I want to take this opportunity to persuade the Minister that we need to engage with the good girls and good boys in Iran on this issue. The Iranian regime's lethal cocktail of brutal oppression of its people at home, its export of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism abroad, including to Iraq, and unwavering pursuit of nuclear weapons, represents the real and present threat to the middle east and wider world. What are the Government doing to address that challenge? In a speech in the European Parliament just before Christmas, the charismatic and courageous president-elect, Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, whom I recently had the privilege of meeting in Paris, stated that

"the common equation of 'either a military invasion or appeasement' is an exercise in political deception. Appeasement is not the way to contain or change the regime. Nor is it the path to avoid another war. Appeasement only emboldens the mullahs. The answer to fundamentalism is democracy."

She went on to explain how a third option was within reach:

"The Iranian people and their organised resistance have the capacity and ability to bring about change."

It is to the Government's shame that the People's Mujaheddin Organisation of Iran, which, as far as I am concerned, is doing nothing but good, is still on the proscribed list. In the previous Parliament, more than 300 members of this House signed an early-day motion to get the organisation removed from the proscribed list, and I hope that the Minister will do what he can to persuade colleagues to do so.

In June 2003, Southend experienced a disaster whereby land slip occurred on four sites, all of which were located along the frontage to the Thames estuary, set back from the water line behind the main road frontage. The largest of those occurred at a location known as the bandstand, which resulted in the ground slipping some 14 m and the destruction of buildings in the vicinity. Dealing with that cost £8 million. We need a retaining wall, and to provide that and sort out the remainder of the cliff would cost £35 million, so we are talking about huge sums of money. Because of the current crisis resulting from faulty census figures, the council does not have the money. So far, through the Thames gateway initiative, the Government have given the town £500,000 to strengthen a short length of the cliff near Royal terrace, but I urge the Minister to try to find out whether any other source could be tapped.

I was the member of the Health Committee who suggested an inquiry into obesity. I told my then colleagues that there was no short-term fix; what was required was a 10 to 20-year strategy. I am delighted to say that my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford, a fellow member of the Health Committee, was instrumental in the inquiry. A conference was held on 4 April, led by Mr. Ron Martin, director of Southend United. I am delighted to report that it was well attended by health professionals, teachers and food manufacturers. Keith Pont of the Essex cricket board was also present. The conference was a huge success, and at the end we agreed that TOAST—The Obesity Awareness and Solutions Trust—would establish a life management project in Southend. Southend United agreed to fund a 10-day run of Outloud Productions' "An Unhealthy Invasion". My hon. Friend and I discussed various issues with McDonalds, which has offered football referee training in Southend schools. Southend-on-Sea borough council has offered to consider ways of using local leisure facilities to best effect. I can tell the Minister, however, that I will not leave the issue alone until we have a proper strategy to combat obesity.

On Sunday, I was privileged to be a guest of the Essex Wildlife Trust on Two Tree island. One of my constituents, Andy Wray, is attempting to break the record for running from Lands End to John O'Groats. The current record stands at nine days, two hours and 26 minutes. Andy Wray will raise money for the British Heart Foundation and the Essex Wildlife Trust. I hope that if anyone wins the national lottery on Saturday, he or she will give some of the money to him.

I end where I began, with the millennium stadium. I shall be back there on Saturday, but before then I shall be at Aston Villa early tomorrow morning. I shall be privileged to watch the finals of the girls' 13-and-under school competition. St. Bernard's secondary school in Westcliff, in Southend, beat 2,800 teams to reach the finals. My youngest child just happens to be playing in the team. Given that I nearly had a heart attack last night watching Liverpool play, I hope the House will support me when I say that I hope the best team wins tomorrow, and will be advised that the best team happens to be St. Bernard's.

When I return to the millennium stadium for the umpteenth time on Saturday to watch Southend United—I pay tribute to its manager Steve Tilson and chairman Ron Martin—the team will be playing Lincoln City in its bid to be promoted to the first division. Again, I hope I take the House with me when I say "May the best team win"—this will be our third attempt. May the best team on Saturday happen to be Southend United.

4.9 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): Stunning, staggering and spectacular—that is how local papers will report the 11 maiden speeches that the House has been blessed with today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) has trawled through them each in turn, I will not do so. Stunning, staggering and spectacular was how my local paper described my election result on 5 May. I pay tribute to my four opponents in that election, who are all excellent people, to Ian Yeomans, who organised the election, and to the general election team, which delivered such a cracking result.

I have known defeat as well as victory, so I hope that the House will allow me to send our best wishes to each of our colleagues, from whatever party, who stood and lost in the election on 5 May. We wish them well in whatever they choose to do in the future. Some of them may, like me and my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser), return to the House eventually and serve their constituents well, as they did in the past. However, we must wish them well. Like me, they were removed by a combination of factors. They may have been voted out by the sound hand of local democracy—people power. It may have been because of their own failures. That was certainly what happened in my case. I failed in certain ways, but I hope that I have learned from that defeat and come back as a stronger and better MP to serve my constituents better. However, the main factor that swept them away was macroeconomic trends, which none of us, as individuals, has control over.

I will certainly not be complacent in my constituency after my victory. I will redouble my efforts and work for our third road and improved infrastructure across the constituency, including at Saddlers Farm and Hadleigh. I will fight for a return to the old, traditional and comfortable Hadleigh village centre atmosphere—we must return that vibrant village atmosphere to that part of my constituency. I will fight to stop the ruin of our borough by overdevelopment. I will also fight to stop the rot of post office closures and for a new post office to be opened for the Canvey Island shopping centre, where one was closed. Thankfully, the Post Office has agreed to try to find a new location for that post office, and that cannot come soon enough.

I will be fighting to safeguard the interests of our special educational needs children and our special schools, particularly Cedar Hall moderate learning difficulty special school in Thundersley. It is a wonderful school that needs to be protected and to have a sound intake of pupils who can benefit from the services that it offers, particularly at primary stage, rather than only at secondary stage, when it is often too late to build the foundations that special pupils need. Early intervention is good and more cost-effective. When parents want to choose special schools, we should make them available.

I welcome the charming and appropriate clock that was recently erected in my constituency by Councillor Wendy Goodwin in memory of Bernard Braine, who

[Bob Spink]

was like a father to me. He was my predecessor and represented Castle Point for about 40 years. Imagine following a man who was here for 42 years; it was a difficult job. He was a wonderful, courteous constituency MP—the epitome of what a constituency MP should be. He ended up as the Father of the House, and those Members who knew him will, I am sure, remember him fondly. He was a true gentleman of the old school.

Bernard would have agreed with me that we should formally celebrate our patron saint, St. George. I shall be working with like-minded colleagues—I see some in their places today—to bring that about.

Bernard would also have supported the campaign for fair funding for hospices, which has been taken up by local newspapers. I congratulate them on that and I also congratulate hospice staff, carers, volunteers and fund raisers on their excellent contributions to keeping our hospices going throughout the country. I also want to mention the Hadleigh, Canvey Island and Benfleet Conservative clubs, which do so much to raise money for all charities, but particularly for the Little Haven hospice in my constituency. I pay tribute to all the good people who are involved in that.

About 20 per cent. of adult hospice funding and about 5 per cent. of children's hospice funding comes from the public purse, but less than 2 per cent. of public funds went to the Little Haven hospice last year, which is simply not good enough. I will keep on the backs of the Government to tackle that problem. They cannot pass it down by saying that it is not their business; but only that of the primary care trusts. The Government must take action and I shall hound them at every opportunity on the Floor of the House and in Westminster Hall to force a proper resolution of the problem. The Conservative party believes in 40 per cent. funding both for children's and adult hospices, and I hope that we shall repeat that winning policy in our next manifesto. We are going to win the next election, building on the fantastic foundation that we have now, so I hope that it comes sooner rather than later.

Lo and behold, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I received a letter this week from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, which provides a sign of hope. It states:

"I know you are a keen champion of the work of hospices, both in your constituency and nationally, and I applaud the initiative you took in bringing the funding difficulties faced by hospices to debate in the House last autumn ... Your speech in the House referred to 'Treasury Rules'. I believe you were referring to Treasury guidance on the question of Full Cost Recovery for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations ... My officials are currently working with the Department of Health who, in turn, meet regularly with representatives from the hospice sector in order to clarify what the above means for hospices, with two aims. Firstly, to arrive at a common understanding of how Government should fund those crucial services which hospices deliver. And secondly, to improve individual funding relationships between PCTs and hospices, which is what we would all like to see."

I look forward to the officials writing to me again in greater detail, as promised, to advise me of what conclusion is reached. It certainly seems like light at the end of the tunnel for hospice funding and it will be welcomed by the hospice movement. I hope that the Chief Secretary will not mind me putting that on the record.

During the election, two local issues were often raised. One was overdevelopment, which I shall not touch on now, and the other was law and order. Let me make it clear that Castle Point is a safe constituency with low levels of crime. Indeed, the only significant crime is the street crime of kids. It is annoying and it increases the fear of crime among residents. Let me also make it clear that we generally have great kids in Castle Point. There are wonderful kids who do much to help the community—kids that we can all be proud of—but their reputation is spoiled by just a few yobs. We must do all that we can to tackle the behaviour of those yobs, but Labour's hands-off, politically correct attitude towards crime and punishment and the failure of tough parental control have created a yob culture in my constituency. I do not want to talk only about the negative side today. I shall take a positive approach instead, as we need that as much as we need tough deterrents. We must give people pathways away from crime and especially from crime driven by addiction to drugs.

I see that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) is in his place, as always. He is an assiduous Member of Parliament and he has always emphasised the need to tackle the drug culture by providing rehabilitation places. Although he sits on the Labour Benches, I am pleased to see him. He has fought for that cause consistently for many years, and I congratulate him on his work.

Last weekend, I attended Thundersley Congregational church, where Teen Challenge UK was making a presentation entitled "The Evidence". I wanted to learn from people who do not sit down and grumble about the drugs problem but get up off their backsides and do something about it. I also wanted to learn from people who had left crime and drugs behind so that they could rebuild their lives.

The Government must find better ways to convert people—and some of them really are the scum of our streets—who, driven by addiction, prey off innocent people and businesses. Such people need to be helped to become decent, tax-paying citizens who give something back to society. We all accept that the Government must find better ways to rescue these addicts, whose every hour of every day is focused on finding money, usually by nefarious means, to get their next hit. However, the solutions will be complex: what works for one person may not work for another. Therefore, we need a range of solutions, in a range of areas.

Prison is often part of the problem, rather than the solution, for drug-driven crime, although I accept that it is a very good form of prevention, as it takes users off the street. Teen Challenge UK rescues and redeems the saddest cases, the people who are at the bottom with little hope. It does a fantastic job and succeeds where other remedies have failed. It is less expensive than Home Office rehabilitation residential places. In fact, it raises one third of its money from voluntary contributions, often from Christian organisations, and that is to be welcomed.

Teen Challenge UK has a success rate of 76 per cent. That is remarkable enough in itself, but I am not talking only about people getting off drugs and crime. The organisation's success lies in the fact that it gets people back to work. That means that they pay tax and reconnect with their families—a very important element—and that they contribute again to society.

Teen Challenge UK has 80 of the worst addiction-driven criminals waiting for a bed place, and that is just in its centre for men in south Wales. The people who are waiting for those places are sad cases. They are gagging for a chance to get their lives and families back, and simply to be decent again. Some of the men are self-harming and at the very end of their tether. They know that they will commit several crimes every day, which brings innocent people into the equation.

Why on earth, therefore, has Teen Challenge UK's priming funding of £700,000 been withdrawn? Fact is sometimes stranger than fiction, and that is the case here. The organisation's grant was removed essentially because it has Christian roots and is run by Christians. Teen Challenge UK is in no way discriminatory in its work: most of its clients are not Christians and will not become Christians as a result of getting off drugs and out of crime.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, are you thinking what we are thinking? I think that you probably are. It was the Welsh Assembly that decided to remove the grant, and I think that it is bonkers for doing so. I do not know whether "bonkers" constitutes unparliamentary language, but I should be happy to withdraw it and replace it with "insane" or "mad". I would even go so far as to say what all of us think—that this is an example of political correctness gone mad. The politically correct approach has been driven to an absurd extreme, to the extent that what is being done is evil in itself. No right-minded person would think it sensible to take away that funding and prevent that very good and cost-effective attempt to address that complicated and difficult problem.

The grant was withdrawn by the Welsh Assembly, on which Labour and the Liberal Democrats must have some influence. The media certainly has some influence and I hope that the matter will be taken up. Teen Challenge UK went to judicial review of the decision and the judge thought that what had happened was outrageous. He found for Teen Challenge UK and the Assembly has agreed to look again at the matter. I encourage every right-minded person to press the Assembly to make a good decision. For the sake of all those sad addicts and for society at large, let us hope that political correctness is dropped and that Teen Challenge UK has its funding replaced, so that it can help hurting people, which is its slogan.

I recommend the organisation's presentation, "The Evidence", and I thank all who work there for taking the trouble to get off their backsides and do something about what is a serious problem for society.

4.26 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con): It is a delight to be able to take part in this debate and especially to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), who is an excellent and assiduous Member of Parliament. He was self-effacing, but he should not be, because he speaks with such passion for the constituents whom he represents so well.

It has also be a great pleasure to listen to the maiden speeches today. It does not seem so long ago that I made my own maiden speech, but time passes quickly as one gets older. I look into the mirror and no longer see the same slim young man of eight years ago. He has been replaced by this rather grizzled figure. I am also made to feel old by how young the new Members look, although we also have some more senior Members. I was impressed by the enthusiasm of those who made their maiden speeches and their passion for being here. I hope that that stays with them, because after eight years as an Opposition Member, I have to say that a certain cynicism sometimes creeps up on me. I have been invigorated by that enthusiasm and I hope that I can recapture the fresh-faced enthusiasm that I had all those years ago.

These debates are one of the better kept secrets of Parliament, and I hope that the new Members who have taken part realise that. The secret has been almost too well kept today, but it is good to see the same faces here. Such debates are a regular occurrence and I am delighted to be able to take part. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) said, we have been in our constituencies during the election and this debate gives us a great opportunity to raise some of the matters that were brought to us as we went around.

I do not wish to detain the House too long—there is only so much it can take—but I do wish to raise a couple of points, linked by a transport theme. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) mentioned Heathrow and the noise suffered in her constituency. I pay tribute to her predecessor, Tony Colman, who was assiduous in raising matters that affected those who live closer to the centre of London than those who live in Uxbridge and the borough of Hillingdon. Heathrow is in our borough and while it brings benefits, it also brings many problems. Alongside the current plans for a third runway, I notice that a sixth terminal is now creeping, worryingly, into the discussions, even though the Government have said that that is not in their plans. Anybody who knows the situation will realise that a third runway would mean a sixth terminal. That worries many people because in many instances it would destroy some villages, as would airport expansion wherever it is. That is why I have never in this House advocated not building at Heathrow and favoured somewhere else. We have to look seriously at our aviation needs.

I was concerned earlier this week when a new lobby group was launched called Project Heathrow. I do not have a problem with people creating lobby groups. That is their right and I am pleased that they do it. This group is headed by a former Member of this House, now Lord Soley. I was concerned that the Secretary of State for Transport went to the meeting. I know this because on television I saw a cream cake land on him thrown by someone who was not too impressed by the idea of expansion. I do not condone that behaviour. My concern was caused by a lack of even-handedness. Many organisations that are opposed to further expansion of Heathrow and I have been trying to meet the Secretary of State to express our views, but unfortunately we have not been granted the same access as the lobby group was on Monday. The Minister is a fair-minded gentleman and I ask him to pass that on, so that when I write asking for a meeting it is borne in mind that even-handedness is a good thing at this level.

We have a few problems with buses. I will not blame the Government for that because it is not their responsibility, but many of my constituents are concerned. By raising this on the Floor, I hope that those with responsibility will realise how seriously I and others take the matter. The London bus service has

[Mr. John Randall]

unquestionably improved greatly. People are using the buses more and more. In fact one of the problems results from more people using the buses—larger buses have been introduced. Two buses cannot pass each other in some of the smaller roads in my constituency, particularly Cleveland road in Cowley and Wise lane in West Drayton, without mounting the kerb, which they do regularly. Obviously that is a great danger to pedestrians. Many students go along Cleveland road to Brunel university and schoolchildren go to Uxbridge high school and Bishopshalt school. That causes great concern to residents. We do not want to lose the bus service, but something must be done.

These debates are for local issues and my next item narrows the debate down to one particular bus stand in my constituency. It has caused more justifiable complaints than many other issues in the past few months. Because Hillingdon hospital has redeveloped and built houses on what was part of its site, the buses can no longer stand in order to stop and turn round where they used to. They now go down past residential homes—the very homes that were newly built. This has happened since Christmas. Other houses are also affected by this problem. You can imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that from the early hours of the morning until late at night, just outside the houses, not only are buses stopping and going—before anyone says that this happens everywhere, I should say that there is a bus stop outside my house and I do have that noise but it moves on—but engines are left running, so the residents suffer from fumes as well as noise.

The residents also have something that I never thought about until I looked into the matter. It is a practical problem that should be looked at, because the bus drivers do not have proper facilities for relieving themselves after driving for some time. I want to discuss this with the union because I am sure that the union would want such facilities for its members. As you can imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not exactly enhancing the area, and one of the places that the bus stand affects is actually a residential home. The noise and all these other activities are causing a great deal of distress.

At first we thought that we could get this problem sorted out fairly easily. We have been trying to get various people together, including the hospital, Brunel university and the London borough of Hillingdon—and Transport for London, which seems a little elusive in spots; I understand that that is not uncommon, but I am working on it and I hope that we can get it to resolve this matter. Meanwhile, the residents have become increasingly frustrated, and have started to mount peaceful protests. I have noticed that the buses have been delayed, shall I say, for 10 minutes or so, causing problems. I do not know whether there is such a thing as a normal protester, but if so these residents could not be described as such; they are just so frustrated by what is going on.

We hear a lot, have heard a lot and are going to hear a lot more about respect. That theme has come up recently and I think we have all noticed that it is lacking in society. I read somewhere, and I think it is probably a better word, that what is actually lacking to a large degree in today's society is consideration for others. That may show itself as antisocial behaviour in a community, as described by many hon. Friends and hon. Members, or lack of consideration by a company, which I would say is what we are seeing in this case. The company does not particularly want the problem but it is not moving fast to remedy it.

I am raising this matter, which is of great concern to my constituents, on the Floor of the House today, in the hope that we will be able to speed up the process and get the problems sorted out.

4.37 pm

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), who is now leaving the Chamber, for the brevity and balance with which he outlined his local issues. I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the fact that I could not be present for the whole debate. I also apologise to other Members, but especially to those who gave their maiden speeches this afternoon. I understand that there were some excellent, even bravura, performances. I apologise to all those whose speeches I was not able to hear.

I did manage to catch the maiden speech of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who tells us that she is the youngest Member of the House. She gave a very mature performance, which I think will serve her well for the future. I also heard the new hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland). Listening carefully to the content of his speech, I would not be surprised if he receives an invitation to become an honorary member of the Campaign group of Labour MPs on the left of the party.

Like my hon. Friends the Members for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) and for Bedford (Patrick Hall), I had originally intended to speak in the Queen's Speech debate, but for obvious reasons—because of the large number of new Members—was unable to do so. I wanted to raise an issue from that speech that has ramifications locally. What triggered it in my mind was the introductory speech by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). I have heard much about the impact of the election and the issues and concerns that have been raised in various quarters, but I want to explain to the House the experience of my constituents and the concerns that a number of them have raised about the election.

I shall deal first with the national debate that has been going on for some time. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome referred to postal voting, about which great concern has arisen because of the recent case in Birmingham. Although my view is that the judge who heard that case rather over-egged what had happened in his comments about a banana republic, there are serious concerns for democrats and we need to look carefully at them. The judge was more rightly criticised because he extrapolated the limited investigation in part of Birmingham to the rest of Birmingham. He even made comments that could be extrapolated to cover other parts of the country.

We must be careful to set in context what happened in Birmingham and how we put that right, but I want to draw a comparison with what happened at the election in my constituency, where 76 per cent. of postal voters

actually voted and about 58 per cent. of others voted. There seems to be a great advantage in providing people with the option of postal voting. I hope that, in whatever we do to strengthen the postal voting procedures, people will not lose the ability to make use of postal voting to increase turnout at elections.

The second issue that has been raised nationally—*The Independent* has been running a campaign on this—is, of course, proportional representation, and it does not surprise us that that issue has been raised by the Liberal Democrats. I happen to have just a little sympathy with that issue, but when people start to talk about a democratic deficit—although some issues relate to that—they should also consider some of the other existing deficits that are as important. Indeed, I should like to talk about those deficits in relation to my constituents.

When I was out and about knocking on doors during the election—we do not get the opportunity during normal times to knock on as many doors as we do during a general election—I discovered that in some of my polling districts up to 20 per cent. of houses had no one on the electoral register. Indeed, in some streets in my constituents, every second house had no one registered to vote. When I worked out a total, I realised that about 5,000 houses in my constituency had no one on the electoral register. That is the first democratic deficit that existed at the election.

The second democrat deficit is that a lot of my constituents who thought that they were on the register and had voted at previous elections found that they were not on the register at the last election. Of course, they had been removed because they had not filled out and signed the form that they now need to return. That legislation was introduced by this Government. I accept the need for that safeguard, but we need to look carefully at ensuring that people understand that that is what they must undertake to secure their registration to vote at elections.

The third deficit is that a lot people in my constituency have come to live in this country. After they have been here for a period, they become citizens and therefore have the right to vote. Most of them come from European countries, but others come from all parts of the world. When they received their electoral registration form, it asked whether they were from various other countries, and quite a lot of my constituents innocently ticked that box and were therefore not considered to be British citizens. When they turned up to cast their vote they discovered that because they had said they were Greek or German they had no vote and could not vote in national elections. That applied to quite a large number of people.

I was not entirely surprised by some of those things. Before the election, because of my concerns about the failure of the registration process to reflect the people who live in my constituency, I contacted the Library for information. From the research that the Library undertook, I discovered that a comparison of the 2003 register, the latest edition at the time, and the 2001 census showed that about 9,650 people were missing from the register. My local authority told me that those people could not vote because they were from another country or were not British citizens. As my constituency is part of the Greater London area, a significant number of people are in that situation. The Library also told me that between 1996 and 2003, 6,200 electors were lost from the register in my constituency. That is a significant democratic deficit for a large number of people.

Why did that happen? There have been a number of reports on the subject. Recently, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister issued a report on registration and turnout. I shall take London boroughs as an example, but I will come on to others. The report showed that although the mean expenditure per elector on electoral registration was about £1.60, the figure varied across London boroughs from just over £4 at best down to 35p at worst. There seems to be a failure in that regard. As a capital city, London has particular difficulties compared with local authorities in other parts of the country, so it spends more on electoral registration than almost anywhere else—but we need to look into the organisation of electoral registration throughout the country.

My local authority is no different from those in other London boroughs or other parts of the country. When I asked how it ensured that everyone was included on the register, I was told that only 77 per cent. of my constituents had been personally canvassed—so no one knocked on the door of 8,730 homes in my constituency and asked the occupants to fill out a registration form. In the most disadvantaged area of my constituency, 61 per cent. of homes did not receive a knock on the door.

Shona McIsaac: I am interested in what my hon. Friend is saying. Indeed, from work I have done in my constituency I found that electoral registration is much lower in the most disadvantaged areas. Such areas have higher problems as regards literacy, so it is vital that councils carry out not just one canvass, but two or possibly three to ensure that as many people as possible in disadvantaged areas are registered to vote.

Mr. Love: I entirely agree.

To conclude the point that I was making, the number of doors knocked on rose as the area became more affluent; indeed, in the most affluent part of my constituency the number reached 95 per cent. The net effect is that there is an inverse relationship between the numbers missing from the register and the number of doors that are knocked on. To return to the point made by my hon. Friend, the opposite should be the case. It is critical that we knock on doors in disadvantaged areas for the reasons that she gave.

I am not drawing conclusions solely about my local authority because I think these things happen across the board, but when I asked my local authority why that situation had come about I was told that it had difficulty in getting people to canvass and often canvassers receive abuse on the doorstep. When we look more closely, however, we find that canvassers are paid less than the minimum wage for the hours they work—significantly less in the case of my local authority. Furthermore, the payments that they receive are based on the number of people that they put on the register. Therefore, there is an in-built incentive to canvas in affluent areas where registration is high. There is an absolute disincentive to go into the areas where the canvassers are needed most. If that is taken together with poverty pay and the perverse incentives of the system, one can understand why it is difficult to get canvassers.

[Mr. Love]

That brings me to the issue at the core of the debate. The Electoral Commission and the Opposition parties tell us that we need to move to individual registration. I asked the Electoral Commission and my local registration officer what would happen to the register under current circumstances if we moved to individual registration, and I was told that it would decimate the register. I appeal to the Minister to take back to the Department for Constitutional Affairs the view that we need to stand firm against individual registration. We need the maximum number of electors on our electoral registers.

I would also like to make a number of practical suggestions that are important to the discussion on how we overcome the democratic deficit. I know that a Bill will be heading to the House in the near future, so I would like to make some suggestions as to what should be included in it. First, we must be much more transparent. It is a devil of a job to find out how much money a local authority spends on electoral registration and, of course, they are always stuck for money. We must ring-fence the money. If the money is ring-fenced and endorsed by the Electoral Commission, any political interference with the registration process will be minimised.

Secondly, we must ensure that we have best practice. Electoral registration offices and officers are often parked at the back of a building or in an outhouse. The officers are left entirely to their own devices and communicate with no one. They need to communicate with each to ensure that we have best practice. Copies of the best practice must be made available so that we ensure that everyone follows it. It is also necessary to ensure that the implementation of best practice is taking place, and one of the ways to do that is through performance review. Carrying out such a review would be an ideal role for the Electoral Commission, which would be able to ensure that things are done properly.

An issue that has caused contention in the past is the advertising of elections and encouraging the idea that it is important for the public to vote. I suspect that all of us would say that we should do that, but electoral registration officers and departments often feel that such activity falls into the grey area between what is political and non-political in the election process. Any Bill that comes forward should make it clear that urging people to vote is not a political act, and the sponsoring of higher turnouts should be a permanent feature of electoral registration departments.

A slightly more controversial issue is that of tapping into the information that undoubtedly exists at a local level about who lives where. A number of databases are held at local authority and other local levels that would assist in ensuring that all the people qualified to vote are on the electoral register. I understand that data protection safeguards are necessary, but we should make better use of local information.

It is, and has been for a long time, an offence not to return an electoral registration form. However, how many prosecutions take place as a result of that? A report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister says that there have been one or two—that is the extent to which that happens. I understand why local authorities might think that it would not be terribly good publicity to prosecute people for not returning electoral registration forms, but it is important for someone to take responsibility. If we do not think that returning the electoral registration forms is a good idea, we should do away with them, but if we think that that is sensible, we must make arrangements to ensure that a prosecution will proceed if the requirement is flagrantly breached.

Elections in the UK are safe and secure, despite the recent publicity, and they are certainly fair. I hope that they are accurate, although I have cited problems today. The challenge from the last two elections is not about postal voting or other worries that have been raised, but to address the fact that only 59 per cent. of the electorate turned out in 2001. Although we edged that figure up to 61 per cent. in 2005, none of us can be proud of the fact that we are still at the lowest level for the past 100 years.

Of course there is an even greater challenge. We often talk about the Americans getting a turnout of less than 50 per cent. in their elections, but that figure takes account of not only those who did not turn out, but those who were not registered. If we included the people who were not registered in this country when calculating the turnout, we would get a much greater surprise, and the shock would lead us to take action. That is where the real democratic deficit arises. When the electoral administration Bill comes forward, I hope that the Government will accept that we require action to start to deal with such problems.

4.57 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I wish to speak about something that needs to be a key theme for the Government over the next three, four and five years and will certainly be a key aspect of my work in my Bassetlaw constituency: raising aspirations, especially those of young people. Over the past four years in my constituency, the foundation blocks that allow aspirations to be raised have been laid. We have the top health facilities and services in Britain, according to the Government's audited statistics. No other constituency in Britain can match our 11 out of 12 health star ratings. However, we need more, and following what has been promised I anticipate that we will get more, including four new health centres, the building of which is due to be started this year.

Bassetlaw has some of the best housing stock in Britain. The former Coal Board housing is extremely good and the new housing that has been built over the past 10 years, with a range of sizes and prices, is good, popular and gives people a varied choice. The £62 million that we have secured to achieve the decent homes standard for public housing will consolidate that position and give us an above-average housing stock compared with the rest of the country.

On education, starting at the end of the year we will get more private finance initiative money per pupil than anywhere else in Britain to rebuild our secondary schools as new, which will provide another vital block to build aspirations.

The final block is employment. When I made my maiden speech four years ago, I was faced with the 4,500 redundancies that had taken place in the six months before the election. I am now facing the problems associated with full employment and a labour shortage. The problem is not so much a skilled labour

shortage, although there is some of that, but an unskilled labour shortage. We have not had to tackle such problems in my area for generations, so I welcome tackling them because they are problems that are due to a successful economy.

Those bedrocks of success, however, will not in themselves increase people's aspirations. A culture of low aspirations goes back many generations in mining communities. Until recently, our education systems defined people's ability in two ways: for males, the choice was to work underground in the pit, with a job for life; for females, it was to be a housewife and sometimes a textile worker. Those were the choices. Educational standards and success were often perceived in terms of the school that had the best football team and best culture of sport, rather than the one that produced pupils who were capable and able to move onward and upward in life, with a wider range of choices.

In terms of tackling the deep-rooted problem of low aspirations, the key thing that Parliament and Government can do is to consider ways in which a wider world is brought to people. There are simple and basic ways of doing that, such as the twinning of schools. One small sub-theme of the new plan for Africa is to twin schools in traditional white communities, such as mine, with schools in Africa so that they have an exchange of views. Over time, in this technological age, that exchange will take place via electronic communication and the schools will learn from each other. That could make a great difference in communities like mine.

I thank the Holocaust Educational Trust, which this week agreed to take six pupils from my constituency to Auschwitz. That will be a tremendous learning opportunity for them. Such an opportunity has not been offered to people in my constituency before. EDF Energy, which owns the two big power stations in my constituency—West Burton and Cottam—has excelled itself in taking primary school children—from year 6 in particular—to the Palace of Westminster over the past four years, and it has agreed to do so again. When I took those young people around the Houses of Parliament, I found to my surprise not how few of them had visited London, but how few had been on a train or to the south of England. Just the visit from some of my schools to London is one small step in raising aspirations. I commend that company for being far-sighted.

This March, we had another big breakthrough with Provident Financial, which took a group from one of my most underprivileged schools to a youth hostel in the Peak district for an outward bound course. Again, that gave a group of young people opportunities that they had never considered before, and those opportunities will increase the life chances of some of them. They will realise that different options are available to them and that life does not begin and finish on their estates, but can be much wider, wherever they choose to go in their lives. That has to be an undercurrent of the debate.

I commend the Youth Hostel Association, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. It was established precisely to allow working-class young people to get to understand, enjoy and benefit from the wider world outside their work and home community. It remains as relevant in its ethos and work today as it did when it was first established in the 1930s. I am delighted that this summer the Government will provide finance to allow those from less-well-off backgrounds the opportunity to take a break outside their community and for the outdoor pursuits arena to be open to them. I hope that that will be a recurrent funding stream from the Government during the four or five years of this Parliament.

Another theme that I hope to see emerging is a plan on which we have been working on for some time in my constituency, and that is beginning to come to fruition. We are looking to build the equivalent of the first teaching hospital, but a teaching hospital for sport. We would like to replace one of our pupil referral units as a whole with a teaching sports academy, where not just those who have been excluded from schools, but those who are doing well and those who are beyond school—such as their younger siblings, parents and grandparents—can come. It will be funded on an economic model using the social enterprise that is now well developed in the east midlands through the East Midlands Development Agency.

Any money made will go back into the community. We will be running the equivalent of a leisure centre, but with everyone within it striving to become sporting coaches and leaders, and we will be looking at the vocational routes that can come from that. This model can create an option of bringing higher education into Bassetlaw for the first time by linking with one of the universities that has degrees in sports and leisure. We hope that it will be a model for providing facilities to the community as well as increasing aspirations, and it is a model that will succeed.

The project goes further than that in its uniqueness. We are looking not simply at sport but at health and education simultaneously. Money has been spent in my community on healthy living, but this is precisely the kind of vehicle that can create healthy living. That is why I am pleased to see the primary care trust, the LEA and the police contributing to the thought processes as to how we will develop this project into something sustainable.

The other strong aspect is the voluntary sector and I am delighted that the Prince's Foundation for the Built Community, the Prince's Trust, the Coalfield Regeneration Trust, Sport England, Sporting Chance, the Football Association, the Football Foundation and many other groups have contributed towards creating what could be a beacon for other areas in the country to copy in terms of raising aspiration and improving the health of the community.

Some of our definitions of neighbourhood renewal are rather bureaucratic and we need to liven them up in a way that provides vision and ownership. As well as fusing together health, education, employment and vocational training, it is young people who are taking the lead. The consultation on the project is not by me or by aging professionals paid by the Government to consult. It is the young people—the teenagers—who are showing the enthusiasm and drive. They recognise that the fusion is important and that whatever is created needs to be cross-generational.

The example those young people give most strongly is their desire to have a dance studio, which they point out can be recreational and educational, can lead to vocational skills, and can be part of a healthier living programme. Parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, babies and toddlers can go to a dance studio.

[John Mann]

That encapsulates the model we are taking forward. I hope that, in the next two or three years, I can come back to this House and outline our successes. We need some new models for raising aspiration and this is something on which we must succeed.

5.9 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I am delighted to have been able to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to Radio Gloucestershire for alerting me to a matter concerning the merger of the Gloucestershire, Avon and Wiltshire ambulance services, which was put out to consultation by the Government and put to consultants by the strategic health authority. I am told that there is to be a meeting tomorrow morning in the Forest of Dean. This will be the first public meeting to review the consultants' recommendation that a full-blown merger should take place. That recommendation is causing great anxiety to my constituents and to the people of Gloucestershire.

I held an Adjournment debate on this subject in Westminster Hall on 9 February 2005, and the then Minister who responded to it—the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman)—said:

"I want local people to produce the best strategy for themselves and to decide how best to improve services throughout the area and not only in one part of it."

I wish that that were true. It was quite clear from the tone of the Minister's reply to my debate, and from my meeting with the chief executive of the Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire strategic health authority, that the Government and the SHA had already embarked on a course of action that would lead to a full-blown merger of the three ambulance trusts.

I believe that this exercise is all about improving the efficiency of the Avon ambulance trust in particular. Gloucestershire is a two-star trust; the Avon and Wiltshire trusts have no stars at all. I believe that this is about trying to bring those two services up to the standard of the Gloucestershire service. At the end of his speech, the Minister also said:

"The status quo is still an option, as is rationalising the management organisation"—

that is, merging the management—

"rather than an outright merger of the three trusts."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 9 February 2005; Vol. 430, c. 450WH.]

I believe, however, that the Government had already embarked on an agenda that would lead to a merger.

That is particularly stupid because, 18 months ago, the Government initiated a project involving a tri-service site in Quedgeley, just outside Gloucester. This involved having the police, the fire service and the ambulance service all on the same site, at a cost of £6.3 million. If this proposal goes through, that site is likely to be scrapped. So £6.3 million of public money will have been completely wasted. This follows the Government's decision to regionalise the fire service; we already know that the fire service is being taken away from the site.

I should like to illustrate the fact that my constituents feel that this proposal is putting their lives at risk. I know that we are always urged not to use pejorative language in the Chamber, but I believe that my constituents' lives could well be put at risk by the proposal. In the short time available to me, I should like to quote a report from *The Citizen* in Gloucester.

"Fran Stevenson's three-year-old son, Zak, woke up with a bad chest on a snowy Saturday morning. By the afternoon he had developed a wheeze which got increasingly worse. Mrs Stevenson, of Woodedge Road, Lower Milkwall, said: 'I began to get worried at about 5pm, and probably a bit more worried because it was a Saturday.' Mrs Stevenson phoned Coleford Health Centre"—

that is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper)—

"and was put through to the out-of-hours service. She explained Zak's symptoms, asked if she could talk it over with a doctor and was told one would ring back within the hour. 'But when it got to 7.15pm, I was torn between ringing 999 or ringing the out-of-hours service again,' she said. 'I rang the out-of-hours service and sat Zak next to me so they could hear him breathe. Once they heard him breath they put us through to 999.'

Mrs Stevenson was stunned by the swift arrival of the ambulance within 10 minutes. 'They were just superb and incredibly professional,' she said. 'They came into my home and helped Zak get dressed so we could get him to hospital.' It was a dark and snowy night and 10 minutes into the journey the ambulance got into difficulties. 'We were sliding, the ambulance wasn't able to move forward,' explained Mrs Stevenson. 'I could hear them talking about not being able to get up Cinderford Hill.'

The ambulance service was not able to get hold of a four-wheel drive so another ambulance was sent. But while they were waiting for it to arrive, the Stevensons were shown more kindness by a Good Samaritan. Local off-duty GP Dr Raj Bhageerutty,"—

I hope that I have pronounced his name right—

"who was on his way to have dinner with his wife, stopped and came on board the ambulance. 'He said he would stay with us and make sure Zak got to hospital. He was very kind,' said Mrs Stevenson. 'When the second ambulance crew took over, we soon started skidding so a gritter truck which had been out salting the roads went in front of us and we were able to get into GRH"—

the Gloucester Royal hospital.

"'They did everything possible to make us feel reassured, they were wonderful,' she said. Zak stayed in GRH for two days after doctors said they thought he had an underlying viral infection which may have been made worse by an allergic reaction."

The point of quoting that story is that local ambulance trusts know the local area backwards. They know exactly the best routes to get people to hospital.

If the merger takes place, the organisation will be based in Bristol. It will look after 2.2 million people, rather than 500,000 people at present. I do not believe that the same local knowledge will be employed. There is also a further fear that if the number of ambulances in rural areas is cut and a paramedic in a car is sent instead, that will not be the same as a full team of ambulance drivers arriving to help somebody with a possible cardiac arrest and able to help them in difficult circumstances.

I should like to emphasise how good the Gloucestershire Ambulance Service NHS Trust is by quoting from a speech that I made on 9 February:

"It is one of the country's leaders in some of the new treatments. For example, in pre-hospital thrombolysis treatment, modern IT enables the electronic kit to be attached to somebody's body and the information to be transmitted to a specialist sitting in a hospital, who can then see exactly what phase the heart is in and administer the drug at precisely the right time. That saves lives.

Not only does it save lives, but it is an example of how people might be kept out of hospital, thereby saving the NHS even more money. An efficient ambulance can treat people on the spot. They do not necessarily have to go to hospital; it might be more suitable for them to go into a nursing home, or even to stay in their own home with proper treatment from an occupational nurse.

Running down the ambulance service makes no sense. Apart from the pre-hospital thrombolysis initiative, the Gloucestershire ambulance service is one of the most innovative in the country in forming partnerships with other first-responder groups, such as the fire brigade. Indeed, the protocol with the St. John Ambulance brigade was so good that that brigade is now using it nationally.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 9 February 2005; Vol. 430, c. 444WH.]

That is an enormous tribute to the people who work in the Gloucestershire Ambulance Service NHS Trust and other brigades, who drive ambulances in often difficult conditions.

There is a further twist in the argument. We are having great difficulty in Gloucestershire with the out-of-hours service at night and at weekends. I have already had a constituency case in which somebody has died because they have not been admitted to hospital in time. There is no doubt that given the problems with the out-of-hours and weekend service, more and more people will rely on a swift and efficient ambulance service. I believe that the only reason for this merger is financial. That is an appalling way to run our national health service. My constituents want to be reassured that at some of the most difficult times that we may unfortunately have to face we can get an ambulance fast and efficiently. The drivers and ambulances in Gloucestershire currently provide that service, and there is great and deep unease about the Government's proposals.

5.17 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) made a powerful contribution to the debate, and I hope that his campaign is successful.

We have had a wide-ranging debate. It has been a debate of two halves. In the first half, we heard a series of maiden speeches from new Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members, and indeed from a new Scottish National party Member, which were of the highest quality. We will all take away from the debate the view that the House will be all the richer for the people who have arrived to serve in it during this Parliament. In the second half of the debate, the contributions from Government Members have been sparse, with a hint of filler in the afternoon's proceedings. One interesting feature of proceedings since our return after the election is that, day after day and in debate after debate, the Government Benches have been empty. The Government have not had enough speakers to keep the debate going. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) said at the start of his speech that he had hoped to make a contribution during the debate on the Queen's Speech, but had been unable to do so. He clearly missed the two days when the debate finished early and collapsed because of a lack of Government Members who wished to speak. If he had been here, he would have had more than enough time to contribute to the debate.

Mr. Love: If my arithmetic is correct, if there are enough Opposition speakers the debate will continue until time runs out. Were there enough of them to keep it going?

Chris Grayling: Some of us would say that in a debate where there were five, six, seven or eight Opposition speakers in a row, there were not quite enough Government Members to take part. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman has a different perspective on life from me.

John Mann: As the hon. Gentleman has directed disparaging remarks at Labour Members, perhaps he would like to have a word with his Whips who requested through the usual channels that those of us speaking late in the day curtail our contributions to allow him to begin speaking at 17.20.

Chris Grayling: I was not aware that the hon. Gentleman's contribution was shorter than his normal rhetoric.

The debate this afternoon has taken us from the islands of Scotland to the lowlands of Somerset, from the origins of King Charles to the origins of the plot to chop off his head, from the city to the countryside. We have visited league champions in three different sports, including the city of Leeds and Chelsea in central London. Members have raised a range of issues and subjects of concern. Many of those stories from different parts of the country and different Members, however, were similar— stories of health services under threat, antisocial behaviour and a lack of policing, and transport problems.

Of course, maiden speeches are by tradition less tied in to the cut and thrust of this place. They are more measured, and therefore give a truer snapshot of the situation around the country. The Deputy Leader of the House should therefore suggest to his Government colleagues that they would do well to listen, as they were elected with well under 40 per cent. of the popular vote—the lowest such vote in history. He and his colleagues know that things are going wrong, and we have had an indication of that this afternoon.

We started with an immensely powerful contribution from the new hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil)—I am safe in pronouncing the name of the constituency, as he is not here to correct me, although the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac), who talked about her common ancestry in that part of the world, will no doubt know if I am well off the mark. He talked about the impact that he has already had in the House—not too many new Members can make a major impact in their first couple of weeks, but clearly, he has managed to change the BBC's weather forecasts in that time. I wish him good luck, as there have been many complaints from Members and people outside, with Scottish connections or from Scotland, about the way in which those weather maps diminish the size of their country.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar also set out a powerful case for the independence of Scotland and explained how he believes that that would change things in his constituency. My message to him and other Members seeking the independence of their country is that they should remember the situation faced by many constituents in other parts of the country, where the level of funding from central Government is much lower than in Scotland. In the case of my county, Surrey, one of my local government officials told me recently that if we received the same level of Government grant as

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Scotland, we would not have to charge a council tax. There are issues that those who seek to break Scotland away from the United Kingdom might not have considered.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes told us of her journey from the Scottish isles to that doyen of resorts, her constituency. She talked about the threat to schools there. What a shame that she has not sought to join the Opposition in arguing for schools to have greater independence, the freedom to set their own admissions policies and the freedom to decide their own destiny, free from the interference of bureaucrats centrally and locally. If we had that kind of change, the difficulties faced by her constituents and their children might be less of a problem.

Shona McIsaac: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. However, my main concern was the Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition council announcing controversial school closures in the middle of an election campaign. I was calling for a moratorium on such announcements so that everybody in our community can work together in the best interests of all children.

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady will well know, if schools had the kind of freedom that we would wish them to have, the situation that she has experienced could never arise. That would make a major difference, especially in rural areas, where small schools have been under threat despite the fact that they are wanted by parents.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was among those who spoke about the problems in his local health service—a hospital project becalmed, a victim of what in his area, I suspect, and certainly in many other parts of the country, is a financial crisis in the national health service. As the Government begin their third term, they will have to get to grips with the fact that all around the country, primary care trusts and hospital trusts are on the verge of bankruptcy if not already beyond it. Doctors are saying that they will lose the ability to refer patients to hospitals later this year because the money is not available to pay for treatment. There is a lurking crisis in the national health service, which as the year goes by will cause more and more problems for patients throughout the country.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his plan to visit local school children tomorrow. They have made a CD in support of the Make Poverty History campaign. I can tell the hon. Gentleman, the children and all involved in the campaign that their aspiration is shared by Members in all parts of the House. We must work together as a Parliament over the next few years to ensure that this country makes a proper contribution to improving the lot of people in the developing world. I have to say, however, that if the children choose to sing to the hon. Gentleman tomorrow and if his singing voice is anything like mine, I hope that he is not invited to join in.

Mr. Heath: I am very good.

Chris Grayling: Well, we will not test that this afternoon.

We heard a powerful maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker). I congratulate him on his first contribution. He paid generous tribute to his predecessor Dame Marion Roe, who I think will be much missed by all Conservative Members and, I hope, by members of all parties. It was clear from his speech that my hon. Friend will be able to provide an ample alternative for his constituents, and will do them proud when representing them here.

My hon. Friend talked about a number of places in his constituency. I remember just one, Hoddesdon. I used to go there as a student in my proudest days when, as captain of the Cambridge university tenpin bowling club, I led it to its first victory for nine years in the Hoddesdon bowling alley.

We heard a much more serious, much more important speech from my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), who is one of the leading authorities in the House on care homes and care for the elderly. He rightly drew attention to the real problems that are occurring in the sector today. We are nothing as a society if we do not provide proper care for the elderly. My hon. Friend was right to say that what is going on in the care home sector is not acceptable, right to identify ways in which the Government have contributed to the problems, and right to emphasise to Ministers the need for something to be done, and done quickly.

I must apologise to the hon. Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne) for not being here for his maiden speech. I had slipped out for some lunch, but I am told that he made a powerful contribution. He spoke of antisocial behaviour affecting even areas well away from our major city centres, and called for autonomy for Somerset enabling it to provide its own police force. This is my message to the hon. Gentleman. My constituency is in a county with a relatively small police force, and even with such local controls the problems do not disappear, especially when—as is the case in many counties—the police are so badly underfunded.

What can I say about the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps)? It was a brilliant maiden speech, made without a note. My hon. Friend will clearly make a major contribution to his constituency. He too paid a generous tribute to his predecessor. Although when I shadowed her I had big political differences with her, I think that all of us in the House admire the way in which she managed to overcome very serious illness to continue her job as a Minister and make a contribution here during her eight years in Parliament. I hope that we all wish her well for the future.

From the hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) we heard something of a rerun of her speech earlier in the week, but she is a distinguished figure on the Government Benches. She is a powerful orator, and her contributions are always welcome.

We heard another maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands). He too will clearly be a highly effective representative of his constituents. As he said, he is the first Conservative representative of the constituency for a number of years, and he is the first Conservative Member of Parliament for Hammersmith for a rather longer time. I wish him well as he works to represent the area—although I must add that the past few weeks have

been a time when, as a supporter of Manchester United, I have not been entirely happy to see the streets of his constituency bedecked in blue. I rather hope that they will not be bedecked in blue again until the next general election.

We heard another very effective and thoughtful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). He, too, will be an effective defender of his constituents. He did well to remind the Government that, after eight years, they cannot always blame what happened before they came to office for the things that are going wrong in his constituency. He talked with great effect about the rural nature of his constituency and the importance to town dwellers of maintaining the fabric of our countryside.

I was delighted to hear the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser). I was not in Parliament when he was here previously but I know of him and I know that he will be welcomed back to the Conservative Benches. That said, we are disappointed, and I am sure that he is too, that his predecessor has left this place. She was a tremendous contributor to the House of Commons, and a distinguished member of the previous Government. I was personally very disappointed when she left the Front-Bench team; she was a great loss. She has moved to another place, where I have no doubt she will continue to make distinguished contributions. She has been one of the major political contributors to this House and to this country over the past 20 years, and will be much missed.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk picked up on one of the themes that has been consistently discussed this afternoon: the absence of adequate policing in too many parts of our country, and the prevalence of antisocial behaviour. Too many police officers are not able to do their job properly because they are tied down by paperwork and by the lack of numbers on the streets on a Friday and Saturday night in particular.

I speak with passion about that matter because, in my constituency on a Friday and Saturday night, there are just not enough police officers out on the streets. If a couple of police cars are covering the whole area, we are lucky. That is the absurd situation even in a city such as Manchester, where perhaps only a dozen officers are on duty at any one time on a Saturday night. It is simply not good enough and the Government have to get to grips with the problem over the next four or five years.

I particularly welcome the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott) to the House because we have much in common. She is the sixth councillor from the London borough of Merton to be elected to the House in the past few years. She and I were both newly elected councillors in Merton in 1998. We were perhaps not as assiduous in our council duties as we might have been, as we moved quite quickly to new political lands—she to Cardiff to fight the Cardiff, Central constituency in 2001, I to Epsom and Ewell. Merton has been an effective starting point for the political careers of many in the House. Her generous tribute to Jon Owen Jones was appropriate. Although we had our differences, as we all do, Jon Owen Jones, whom I knew from serving on many Committees, was an excellent Member of Parliament. I regret his departure. I enjoyed his company and I hope that the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central can live up to the precedent that he set. It was probably a wise choice to move on from Merton to Cardiff as West Barnes ward, which she served, is Conservative again. There are no Liberal Democrat councillors in the London borough of Merton and, of course, Wimbledon has a Conservative MP again, so I suspect that she is better off where she is now.

On the subject of Merton councillors, my congratulations go also to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), both on her maiden speech and on her success at the election. She was instrumental in reducing the number of former Merton councillors in the House by defeating Tony Colman, who was leader of Merton council. Rightly, she talked generously about him, but I am tremendously pleased that she is now in the House. She carved a name for herself on election night and I am sure she will continue to do so in the years ahead.

My hon. Friend took us on a fascinating tour of her constituency and talked about some of the charitable, voluntary and community work that she has been involved in. In that connection, she brings valuable experience to the House and I am delighted to see her here. She will also be an important champion for the District line, which, as she knows, and as I know as a former Wimbledon resident, needs some effective champions.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) is the youngest Member of the House. She has two things in common with her party leader: he was the youngest person in the House when he was first elected and, as she said, the west highland way links their two constituencies. I am disappointed that she did not follow in the tradition of representatives of her constituency by calling for the resignation of the Secretary of State for Scotland. She urged us all to visit her constituency and hoped that we would not go for political purposes.

I suspect that there will be some who seek to wrest the seat back from her, and when they come knocking on her door, it will not be entirely to see the sights in her constituency, but I wish her well in the House. She is absolutely right to talk about the importance of engaging young people in the political process and of having hon. Members of different age groups in the House. It is clear from the results of the election that age diversity in the House is increasing, which can only be for the better.

The hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) made an interesting speech, which I interpreted as the first frost. When a Labour Member rises to express concerns about the economy, to call for the relaxation of inflation targets, to declare that the era of high inflation is long past and that we should intervene in the currency markets, I take that as a sign that Government Members are beginning to get a little jumpy about what has happened in the last eight years. They built on the foundations provided by the last Conservative Government and it seems that the economic tide may not be as one way as Labour Members have claimed in recent years.

The hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) provided the last maiden speech today. He spoke effectively about his constituency and how he came to be here. His point about his involvement in the business of the House through its education programme

[Chris Grayling]

was telling. It is beholden on us all to support the education programme and to encourage young people who are interested in politics to visit and see what we do. We should be open in explaining how it all works and try to make it more transparent than it can sometimes appear. We also need to encourage the next generation, which will come on behind us, to be as active and interested in politics as we have been ourselves.

The hon. Member for Bedford (Patrick Hall) spoke about the problems and unfairnesses in the council tax system. We have received mixed messages from the Government about what they propose to do with the council tax system. I do not believe that the alternative offered by the Liberal Democrats is the right one—*[Interruption.]* Indeed, we do not really know what their policy is nowadays. I certainly believe that we have to reduce the burden of council tax on our pensioners, which is what Conservatives sought to do at the general election. I hope that the Government will listen to that message on local government finance and act to help our pensioners in the years ahead.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) made a characteristically powerful speech about a variety of issues in his constituency. I offer him my best wishes for Saturday and my best wishes to his daughter for tomorrow. I have a son who is an active football player and I know how proud parents can be on the touchline. I wish him well. My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) also made some powerful points about Teen Challenge UK and I hope that he is successful in securing funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) spoke in broad terms about the challenges facing his constituency. When he described himself as "grizzled", I thought that he was being hard on himself. We in the House simply regard him as timeless. He speaks as the voice of Uxbridge in more ways than one, as anyone who tuned into local radio stations over London in the past few months will have heard. He talked about the challenge that the growth in demand for travel will present in his constituency. It will be difficult to achieve the right balance in this country over the next few years. We must be wise and listen to the voices of caution about the need to strike the right balance between supporting our economy and recognising the interests of residents in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Putney.

We have had a good debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in which many issues have been brought to the fore. It has revealed to the House how much commonality there is across the country in the challenges that we all face over policing, the future of the health service and transport services. There is an important lesson to be learned from this afternoon's debate. Although the general election led to the loss, either through retirement or defeat, of many valued colleagues on both sides of the House, our new intake of hon. Members has enriched this place with clear, articulate and effective contributions to our proceedings.

5.39 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Nigel Griffiths): As Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, it is a pleasure to be able to respond to the excellent contributions that have been made today. There have been some maiden speeches of the highest quality, and quality contributions from both sides of the House.

I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), the former shadow Leader of the House, for his work, courtesy and co-operation. I wish him well in his new post, as I do the Minister for Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas).

I begin by associating myself with the generous tributes paid to former Members of the House who have now left: Harold Best, Peter Bradley, Iain Coleman, Tony Colman, Adrian Flook, Melanie Johnson, John Lyons, Calum MacDonald, Jon Owen Jones, Marion Roe, Gillian Shephard and Tony Worthington. Each made a significant contribution to the House, as they did to their constituencies.

Ten impressive maiden speeches were made today, the first of which came from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr. MacNeil). He spoke with great feeling about the avoidable deaths of some of his constituents, and about his attempts to improve transport and other links to ensure that that does not happen again. He reaffirmed his and his party's solid commitment to independence. I think that that is a bit of a relic in Scotland in this century, but one has to admire the hon. Gentleman for being true to his convictions.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) spoke with passion about the great sport of fishing, a passion that he shares with many hon. Members, not least among them my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster). My hon. Friend is a former champion at a pastime that is probably Britain's most widely practised sport today. The hon. Gentleman also spoke about poverty in this country. His constituency is home to Britain's largest private-sector employer, and I look forward to working with him to improve educational opportunities and to eliminate poverty in the UK.

Education was also the theme adopted by the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), who highlighted the issue of town versus gown. That is a perennial issue among hon. Members representing university constituencies. The hon. Gentleman also showed his knowledge when he conjured up the memory of the great George Bernard Shaw—a GS praising a GBS. He was eloquent in his praise of the voluntary work done by local people in respect of learning disabilities, the area in which my own background lies. He also stressed policing matters and antisocial behaviour, and I am pleased that, since 1997, the force servicing his constituency has acquired 376 extra officers.

Policing was a common theme, and it was adopted by the hon. Member for Taunton (Jeremy Browne) in a highly impressive and effective maiden speech. He strongly supported the community support officers who complement the work of the local force, and I am sure that he will want to congratulate the local chief constable—if not the Home Secretary—on supplying a further 410 officers to his force since 1997.

I welcome the hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser) back to the House. His predecessor was, like him, a person of special ability and great courtesy in

her dealings with hon. Members of all parties. She always put across her point of view, on behalf of constituents and party alike, with considerable effectiveness.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) spoke about the need to link respect for authority with society. He stressed the need for better laws rather than more laws. As a former DTI Minister championing the cause of business, I agree with that. Indeed, I hope that the hon. Gentleman has learnt the lesson from the 51,699 regulations that were brought in between 1979 and 1997, and that we can work together on a common agenda.

I welcome also the contribution from the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands). It was an historical tour de force on his constituency. It was not just the Cook's tour, but almost a Doctor Who style speed through time. He spoke, as several right hon. and hon. Members did, about the need to improve transport and in particular, in his case, the tube. He also spoke about a threat to a local hospital, and I am sure that that will have been noted. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) echoed that theme and also spoke about electoral reform, which was mentioned by other hon. Members, too. He spoke about how to strengthen democracy, an important theme to which we will no doubt return.

Care homes were the main theme for the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott) in an impressive maiden speech, although she touched on other themes. The issue of care homes was also taken up by the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), who spoke of the frustration that many hon. Members feel on behalf of their constituents when care homes have funding problems. Relatives find that heavy pressure hard to bear.

The hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made health the key issue of her speech. She praised the world-class service that the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability provides, and I praise her for her work in raising money for a hospice. That was also emphasised by the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink). On a personal note, when I took time out during the election to visit a hospice in my constituency, the Marie Curie clinic on Frogston road, I met a constituent whom I had canvassed some years before. She was bravely fighting a disease that will by now have claimed her life. It was a sobering meeting for a Member of Parliament for a marginal seat. Some people lost their seats on that Thursday, but many others were bravely fighting diseases such as cancer and lost the ultimate fight. That puts into perspective the difference in importance of the battles we have in this House and elsewhere. I was delighted that my constituent also praised the staff of the national health service, and I join her in that.

Like the hon. Member for Putney, the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) raised the issue of aircraft noise, which was reinforced by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown). It is a serious issue and hon. Members made balanced points, accepting the importance to Britain of commercial airlines and their business.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) spoke impressively on fair trade, a subject close to the hearts of many hon. Members, including mine. I helped to found Scotland's first fair trade organisation many years ago and I was delighted that that issue has also been taken forward in Leeds, North-West. I praise the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) on his work for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development.

I also praise the work of the local government service. On 5 May, I celebrated the fact that it was 25 years since I was first elected to a local council. Local councils do a tremendous amount of good work. One of our drives must be to ensure that all council services are brought up to the levels of the best.

I praise the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) for his speech. He raised, as he assiduously does, the case of a constituent detained abroad. He knows that this poses particular problems in particular countries. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is personally aware of the case and I believe that he has raised it with the authorities more than once. He will want to study the additional information that the hon. Gentleman gave us today.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the threat that he sees posed by Iran. I am not sure what action he was urging, but doubtless there will be plenty of time in this Parliament for that subject to be debated so that we can hear his views. I join him in congratulating St. Bernard's school on coming through a competition of thousands of people of talent. The talent of young people is important. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) used the word "aspiration" and spoke of how we all try to drive up people's aspirations to give them the job, the education, the apprenticeship or the opportunities that they deserve and, indeed, need.

Patrick Hall: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not let it go unnoticed that today is learning at work day? Learning at work representatives have encouraged tens of thousands of people at work to improve their skills and confidence, and the Government have backed that initiative. Does he agree that there is more to be done on that constructive theme?

Nigel Griffiths: Yes, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the chance to reinforce his message. I praise the work of the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry in driving the skills agenda forward in the work place and encouraging people to ensure that they have the skills and personal confidence necessary. I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw for raising the initiative of schools twinning with Africa. James Gillespie's high school in my constituency has done so successfully, and I commend the experience that my hon. Friend and we in south Edinburgh have had.

More experienced hon. Members raised other issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) talked about school closures. She will join me in wondering how, when providing 28,000 extra teachers, one is faced with unnecessary school closures—some of course are necessary—during an election period. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills will note her points. In all honesty, I am not sure that any moratorium of the type she suggested is practical or could be enforced. If she has further thoughts on that, I know that she will communicate them as effectively as she always does.

[Nigel Griffiths]

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) spoke with detailed knowledge of the ports authority issue. She will know that the Department for Transport announced the Future of Transport White Paper. Its intention is to examine carefully the national framework of ports policy once decisions have been taken on outstanding applications for major container port development. She will track that with considerable interest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) raised the issues of housing investment and of the economy. I know he will welcome the fact that we have tripled investment in housing capital from £1.65 billion in 1997 to £5 billion now, and that that has helped reduce the number of non-decent houses by 1 million in that time frame. None the less, it is clear that he has some advice for the Chancellor on how to run the economy. The Chancellor always welcomes such advice and I am sure that my hon. Friend will find a way during debates and Treasury questions to raise his views with the Chancellor, and have the Treasury specialists pore over them and see what might be gleaned and gained from them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Patrick Hall) raised the issue of local government funding. I have lived through several local government funding crises as well as the revaluations—indeed, my maiden speech was on that very subject, which allowed me to take a seat from the Conservatives for the first time in 100 years. That was, of course, the council tax, more popularly known as the poll tax—

Mr. Burns: The community charge.

Nigel Griffiths: The community charge; indeed. There are no easy solutions to this issue; if there were, they would have been adopted. The Liberal Democrats are thinking seriously about the policy that they put forward and I shall not criticise them for that, but it shows the difficulty of formulating a policy and getting it to stick for a length of time. Obviously, we await the outcome of the Lyons review with considerable interest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) said that the key to democracy was more effective participation of citizens in elections. I very much agree with what he said about our duty as democrats, and I agree that the agencies that are responsible for ensuring that every citizen can vote must register all voters. I hope that his message will be communicated to the appropriate Ministers as effectively as he communicated it to us. It is important that we do not continue to hear the tales, which I think all Members have heard, of people who should have been allowed to cast a legitimate vote at a polling station finding that they were not on the electoral register, in spite of being UK citizens.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) raised the issue—pending recommendation, as I understand it from him—of the Gloucestershire ambulance service. It will of course be studied in some detail. I hope that Zak has made a full recovery, but having heard the hon. Member's account of what happened under the present system, I must tell him that if he thinks it satisfactory that two ambulances should be skidding around, and that an off-duty GP who was merely passing was able to intervene and perhaps sustain life and certainly help, I can understand why a review has been taking place. I hope that he will not pray that example in aid, but will muster the evidence once he has had a chance to read the report, rather than pre-empt its judgment. I am sure that that is what he will do.

I shall ensure that my ministerial colleagues are aware of some of the issues that I have been unable to cover. I know that the speeches made here today will be the subject of debates both in the House and outside it. I believe that we are all here to serve. We all have an aim to create a better society, and certainly to leave society better after our modest contribution in this legislature than we found it. May I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, wish you and all hon. Members a relaxing Whitsun recess? I look forward to seeing people return a week on Monday, reinvigorated after that recess.

It being six o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Burial Grounds (Cumnor)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

6 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to the House for the opportunity to raise the important issue of the closure of burial grounds and, in particular, the controversy about the proposed closure of the burial ground—the churchyard—in Cumnor in my constituency.

I welcome the Minister of State, Department for Constitutional Affairs, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Harriet Harman), to her place and congratulate her on her appointment.

I am conscious of the fact that this Adjournment debate is the last business before the brief recess, so it is just as well, given that this is such a controversial issue, that there is a time limit on the debate, although I hope that we will be able to cover all that needs to be covered in that time.

The debate relates to the application by the parochial church council, the vicar and the churchwardens in Cumnor for the Privy Council, on the advice of the Home Office, to declare the churchyard there closed. There is a long-standing disagreement between the local residents and, in particular, their representatives on the Cumnor parish council and the vicar. I happen very much to understand the point of the concerns raised by my constituents and Cumnor parish council, but no personal criticism is intended or meant to be implied in what follows of the vicar of Cumnor, who has to balance a number of issues. I have had a chance to speak to an officer of the diocese about its perspective, and I hope to speak to the vicar in due course.

I want to cover some background issues that relate to the shortage of space for burial, to the suggested changes to the law and in the way that we should look for more burial space and, indeed, to the timetable of action, or inaction, on this matter. I shall then come to the specific case of Cumnor parish council and its concerns about the proposed closure of the churchyard at the local parish church.

I am pleased to say that I have had the opportunity, albeit only today, to pass on to the Minister the details of my concerns and to raise with her in advance some of the questions to which I seek answers. I hope therefore that we can made progress on the substantive issues, but I am the first to recognise that the law involved is complicated—that may be why it has taken so long to make progress towards solving the problem—and that some of the issues raised by this case are also complicated. Nevertheless, I think that we can make progress because there is clearly a need to do so.

As the Government identified in their consultation document issued in January 2004, some seven years ago, in 1997, the London planning advisory committee, working in conjunction with the relevant burial authorities and their representatives in London, carried out research into the existing capacity for burials in Greater London. In summary, they raised the concern that there was only seven years' burial capacity in inner London and 18 years in outer London. Clearly, as those figures were averages, some boroughs would be very short of capacity. There is no reason to believe that the situation outside London is significantly better. Indeed, in some cases, it may be worse.

The long-standing view of those with an interest in such issues is that the best approach to take, if we are to prevent the acquisition of land for more burial space and the associated cost, is to consider further, and then to implement, a form of the lift-and-deepen practice, whereby bodies in existing graves that are either more than 75 years old or more than 100 years old, for example, are exhumed to be reburied at a lower depth, so that further new burials can take place on top.

Progress has been very slow. Clearly, sensitivities are involved, and where cultural sensitivities, perhaps moral sensitivities and spiritual matters are involved and where people have deep-seated views and various religions may differ, it is important that the matter is handled sensitively. Of course, I accept that, but that does not mean that such issues should not be handled at all and that there should be endless delay. Indeed, that may exacerbate the problems caused to people facing bereavement and the need to bury in the meantime.

Successive Governments have acted slowly. For example, an article in *The Guardian* of 13 May 1999 stated, although I do not know on what basis:

"The Home Office is expected to publish a consultation document this summer"

on the reuse of space in crowded cemeteries. That was the summer of 1999. No such document was produced, but an article in the Edinburgh *Evening News* of 26 April 2000 discussing a proposal made by Tam Dalyell, the then MP for Linlithgow, stated:

"The home office today confirmed it is considering the re-use of burial grounds."

However, we still did not have even a Green Paper.

Julie Rugg of York university's cemetery research group was cited in an article in *The Guardian* of 2 September 2000. She said:

"We need to know why the government is not saying anything. I think there is a fear at ministerial level that people are going to find this area quite distasteful."

I do not dispute the existence of such fear but it is no excuse for inaction. We should proceed with sensitivity. However, although I am alleging slow progress, I do not suggest that the Minister has anything to do with that, as responsibility for the matter has only recently been transferred from the Home Office to the Department for Constitutional Affairs.

The article quoted the Home Office as saying:

"We will be publishing a consultation paper, but we don't have a date for it and there is nothing imminent."

We finally received the consultation paper in January 2004, so the Home Office spokesman was right four years before—it certainly was not imminent. An article in *The Times* of 23 June 2003 pointed out that the Home Office had still not published its research into whether old graves should be re-used three years after the research was conducted. I do not know whether the research has ever been published, but there is certainly a feeling that not much progress has been made.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

The burial and cemeteries advisory group was set up in the Home Office following a Select Committee report of March 2001 that stated that the Government must make progress. The consultation document published in January 2004 was the result, although the report should have been made by the end of 2002. The consultation period finished almost a year ago and we await publication of the response to the document. I hope that the Government will move swiftly to make proposals for whatever legislation is required. I certainly hope that they will adopt a policy and will not allow further delay by citing the need for more research. There is plenty of research and it is time for action. There is a shortage of burial space in local communities, including Cumnor, which brings me to the need for this debate.

Why is the church in Cumnor seeking to have its churchyard closed? There are several motives although they may not be valid reasons for closure. The first is that the churchyard is full. I shall return to that point. The second could be to transfer the costs of maintaining the churchyard to the local authority, as that is what happens when churchyards close. I shall not discuss that motive in this debate, although it is known that some communities fear that a church facing financial difficulties and with various funding priorities is not keen to maintain churchyards and so favours their closure to save money.

Another argument is that the church does not want to face the difficulties of negotiating over the nature of memorials. It has been made clear that that is not a legitimate reason for the Home Office to agree a closure, but, according to the vicar, it appears to be an issue in this case. In an article in the Cumnor parish news—I understand that these points were made and recorded in the minutes of a working group seeking to find a compromise subsequent to the appearance of the article—the vicar states:

"In the past decade and particularly since the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, families have become much more involved in funeral arrangements. Gone are the days (thankfully!) when people would meekly accept what the vicar said. This extends to the memorials that people want. The Diocese of Oxford has strict regulations regarding which memorials are permitted in churchyards. These are to maintain the character of the churchyard—to ensure that the churchyard is a pleasant and peaceful place to be in for all visitors. The PCC felt that it would become increasingly difficult to enforce these regulations without causing significant hurt to families who wanted a memorial that was not permitted. Statistics from other churchyards and burial grounds indicate that this is the case, and, indeed, you may have heard of such stories in the media in recent months."

Under a paragraph with the heading "Legal Closure", the article continues:

"The PCC therefore decided to seek to legally close the churchyard."

That implies that, as well as the assertion that the churchyard is full, the one motive was that the vicar's pastoral duties would be undermined by disputes—one can see his point—with family members about memorials. If this is happening up and down the country, there may need to be clearer and more consistent rules, but it is not an argument for closing churchyards.

The real argument is whether the churchyard is full, and this is one of the key questions. A letter that I have seen from the parish council to the Home Office of 26 November 2003 points out:

"During the course of its discussions members of the Working Party (including the Vicar) visited the churchyard and identified an area that could be used for new burials.

It is the Parish Council's contention that if the Vicar accepts that further burials could take place in the churchyard then it is perverse to argue for closure on the grounds that there is no proper room for new graves."

Cumnor parish council is of the view that there could be proper space in the churchyard for new graves.

One of the key questions is whether, when talking about the potential space for burials, the church is talking about reburials and the Home Office does not recognise that as an option. I would be grateful for clarification from the Minister on that. It is the view of some people to whom I have spoken that existing ground—particularly consecrated ground—that has been used for burials could be used again for reburials after a period of time. It is not clear on what basis the Home Office argues in some of its correspondence that it is not permitted, allowed or lawful for reburials to take place. The Burial Act 1857 precludes the digging up of human remains except with a licence from the Home Office, and those licences or exemptions—or a faculty granted on the ecclesiastical side of the law—are often granted when churchyards need to be changed for new road construction or development. It is not clear why such an exemption cannot be granted in the case of permission to rebury.

We have been made aware in the parish of other cases—specifically that of Brightlingsea town council. The judgment in that case referred to the fact that, in the diocese of Bath and Wells, reburial is the policy before closure is considered. It seems to me peculiar that that should be the position in that case.

I quote from the judgment:

"In Re West Pennard Churchyard 1992.1.WLR 32 Newsom Q.C. Ch. held:

'But I should point out that no churchyard is full and ripe for closure until all parts of it in which reburial is possible have been buried over again at least once. Again, until closure, all legal burial rights continue. Over the centuries churchyards have been buried several times over and it cannot be said that a churchyard is nearly full considering only the areas which have never been used for burials. When there are no unused spaces, parishes sometimes seek to apply for closure in order to pass the expense of running the churchyard to the local authority'"—

that relates to the motive of the transfer of cost that I raised earlier.

The judgment continues:

"It is the standard practice in this diocese (Bath and Wales), and has been so for at least the last ten years, to advise parishes that the Department of the Environment will not allow closure of a churchyard except after careful enquiry as to how far areas already used for burial can be used again".

If that is the case in that example, it seems strange that the Home Office has made it clear that it does not generally consider the possibility of reburial after any period—even in consecrated ground, and thus under ecclesiastical law in some way—to be valid grounds for resisting an application to close a churchyard.

When determining whether the churchyard is full, we must ask the basis on which it is considered to be full. The vicar made the following point in the article in the Cumnor parish news a few years ago:

"The churchyard has been full for the past thirty-three years. That is, there have been no burials of bodies (except in existing family graves) during this period, since there have been no unused plots."

If that is the basis of the argument, I suggest, as the parish council certainly argues, that one would need evidence before asserting that that demonstrated that the churchyard was full.

After a similar contentious debate during the Brightlingsea case, the Home Office refused the application for closure because there was evidence that the churchyard was not full. I would like clarification from the Minister on a question that was put to me by a clerk of Cumnor parish council: where is the burden of the evidence?

The parish council argues:

"in the light of the Brightlingsea decision the Home Office asked Cumnor Parish Council the wrong question. In essence, they asked us if we knew of any areas in the Churchyard that were unused."

The parish council is not an expert on the use of the churchyard, so it answered in the negative. The Home Office should perhaps have asked the parish council whether it knew for sure that the churchyard was full, or whether the church authorities, which wished to secure the closure, could provide evidence that it was full. A geophysical survey was done in the Brightlingsea case to try to identify whether there were unused spaces. I do not think that it is sufficient to consider such a contentious matter simply on the basis that there were no burials because it was judged that there were no unused plots.

The parish council has tried to identify other burial grounds in my constituency, but it has not been successful, despite quite a lot of effort. I argue that it would be inappropriate to allow the closure while the Government—and, I hope, Parliament—are considering whether reuse would be possible, given that no one is arguing that that would not be likely to create a source of space in the existing churchyard. Indeed, previous vicars are on record as supporting that idea. Additionally, the closure would be inappropriate given that the applicant has not provided evidence that the churchyard is full.

Will the Minister reassure me that whoever is in charge of the matter—I guess that it is her Department—will not grant the closure application, at least for the time being? I urge her to press on with all speed with producing proposals for legislation to increase the ability to reuse space in burial grounds that has not been used for many decades and, indeed, for more than 100 years.

6.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Constitutional Affairs (Harriet Harman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing the debate and choosing its subject. He has clearly demonstrated that he has examined carefully the general issue across the board, as well as the specific case in the village in his constituency. In doing so, he has shone a light on something that hon. Members do not rush to discuss. None the less, we all know that it is of great importance.

Burial grounds are a source of strong community feeling, especially in rural areas, but also in my constituency in London. The upkeep and maintenance of our local cemetery in Nunhead is a keenly felt local issue. There were also strong local feelings when we planned to build social housing on the site of an old church, which had a churchyard with remains in it. I know well the issues that he raises.

In commenting on the general position and what the Government are doing about it, I hope to reassure the hon. Gentleman that things are happening and that progress is under way. One of his concerns is that the Government are dragging their feet and not enough is happening. I also want to deal with his concerns about the Cumnor burial ground.

The hon. Gentleman is right that in 2001 the Environment Sub-Committee investigated the country's burial arrangements and delivered its report on our cemeteries. It found a number of shortcomings, in particular the way of setting and enforcing standards, long-term problems regarding the maintenance and provision of burial space, a need to find the appropriate balance between the utilitarian and aesthetic aspects of burial grounds, and a need to review our antiquated and inconsistent burial laws.

The Government have undertaken much work since then to tackle the issues. To assist us, we set up an advisory group, drawn widely from people involved in burials, religious organisations, groups with environmental and historical interests, and others. We commissioned and published the findings of a research study into cemetery management, and last year we published a consultation paper on a review of burial law. We have initiated a survey of all burial grounds in England and Wales. We have also worked closely with those involved in burials to draft advice and guidance to burial ground operators on the management of cemeteries, and on ensuring the safety of memorials within burial grounds. We hope to issue those documents a little later this year.

We are considering the detailed comments received on the burial law consultation paper. We also need to take account of the burial grounds survey that was launched earlier this year. There is a wide range of issues to address, but the re-use of old burial grounds for new burials and other matters is one of the most significant and sensitive concerns.

For the past 150 years, that has not been a problem. Where churchyards and other burial grounds have become full, additional land has been acquired by the church or the local council, and burials have simply taken place in another location. That option is no longer so easy, especially for urban communities. There is competition from other land uses—such as housing—and the price of land has increased, if any suitable land is available in the first place. The result has been to create new burial grounds away from the focus of the

[Harriet Harman]

local community. In some cases, they are physically distant and far less convenient for the community to which they relate. It is also harder to find the necessary funds to maintain burial grounds that are unused.

The hon. Gentleman questioned our approach and raised a number of the issues that came to light in response to the consultation paper. The questions include: can we can continue to create new burial grounds indefinitely; is that the best use of land in short supply; and, even if we did want to allocate extra resources to buy land to create more burial spaces, would they be too far away and do we not have better uses for the land? We were also asked whether we should be doing what the hon. Gentleman suggested—lifting and deepening, which provides more space vertically in a burial ground. Would that policy be compatible with our commitment to sustainable development?

We raised those questions in the consultation paper, which we published last year. The responses varied widely. Most of the people involved in the burial business were in favour of re-using burial grounds in some way. Most of the individuals who responded were seriously concerned about that suggestion and not so happy with it.

Many individuals want to retain their local parish churchyard as an essential part of their community life, but many others believe that respect for the dead and, ultimately, for the living demands that human remains be allowed to lie undisturbed in their final resting place. Even within a village, there are people who want to keep using the churchyard and others who feel that the respect of the community must be given to its deceased members, so the yard must not be disturbed. We have to reconcile those opposing views and reach a sensible way forward. That is what we will be addressing and we would want to bring forward proposals soon.

I should like now to come to the question of the Cumnor churchyard. Whether a churchyard is full is a question of fact. Therefore, there is a question of evidence as to whether it is full or not. If it is asserted and not challenged that it is full, that might be regarded as an adequate basis for the Secretary of State to accept that it is full and to accept a closure. In the case of Cumnor, the argument is that the churchyard is not actually full, although there is a desire to close it. Therefore, the question of its being full having been challenged, it is important for officials in my Department to look closely at the basis on which they will gather the evidence as to whether it is full in order to make their recommendation to the Secretary of State for him to make his decision.

I want to make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that nothing will happen that will take the local community by surprise and that the evidence will be made plain and a decision taken on it. I agree that the churchyard is not, as a matter of evidence, full just because the people who run the churchyard say that there are no vacancies and that they are not prepared to make extra plots available.

In relation to the churchyard in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, full consideration of the evidence will be given and we will go about that in a transparent way. The decision will be based on evidence and will not take anybody by surprise. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman assisting me in my task of reaching a conclusion on these difficult issues as we take this forward as a matter of Government policy.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes past Six o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 6 June 2005

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

DEATH OF A MEMBER

Mr. Speaker: I regret to have to report to the House the death of Mrs. Patsy Calton, Member for Cheadle. I am sure that Members in all parts of the House will join in mourning the loss of a colleague and in extending our sympathy to the hon. Member's husband, family and friends.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Voting Arrangements (Service Personnel)

1. **Alistair Burt** (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent representations he has received in relation to the voting arrangements for forces serving abroad.

[1916]

3. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If he will set up an inquiry into the number of service personnel not registered to vote on 5 May.

[1918]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): Before I answer those questions, may I express my sincere condolences and those of the whole House to the families and friends of the two soldiers who have died since we last reported to the House: Guardsman Wakefield, from the Coldstream Guards and Lance Corporal Brackenbury from 1st Battalion The Kings Royal Hussars, who were both tragically killed while doing their duty last month. The thoughts of the whole House are with their families.

The Government have made unprecedented efforts to encourage and enable service personnel to vote. I have received a very small number of representations in relation to voting arrangements for forces overseas, none of them from serving service personnel.

Alistair Burt: I am sure the whole House would wish to be associated with the Secretary of State's opening words. I offer a warm welcome to the right hon. Gentleman on his first Question Time in his new role as Secretary of State—a phrase with which he is no doubt becoming very familiar as he pursues his not very hidden agenda of collecting more souvenir red boxes around Whitehall than any other living Minister. As the right hon. Gentleman will know from his personal experience, there are few more important jobs than being responsible for our service personnel, particularly with so many of them actively engaged abroad. I am sure the whole House will wish him Godspeed in his role and in his work on their behalf.

Bearing in mind the importance and the urgency with which representations were made about the ability of our armed forces to vote in the recent election, can the Secretary of State tell us how many of those who were actively engaged in defending the right of the Iraqi people to vote in their general election were unable to vote in our general election, and whether it is true that 100,000 leaflets printed by the Electoral Commission at the end of January for transmission to the forces were not sent from the Ministry of Defence until late February or early March, very close to the registration period for the general election?

John Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his typically courteous welcome. Gaining familiarity continually with Government posts is a delight that he may not experience for some time. With reference to his question, it is right that servicemen and women who serve their country should have the right to vote on their country's future. We should remember that today perhaps more than any other day, on the anniversary of D-day, when so many people sacrificed their lives for our freedom and democracy. On the specific case, it is no longer a simple matter of tabulating which servicemen and women are registered, because since 2000 servicemen and women have not been required to register only through the services, but have been able to register also through the normal registration course or through overseas registration. It is therefore not possible to give the hon. Gentleman the specific details that he requests. However, notwithstanding the fact that in conjunction with the Electoral Commission we have made unprecedented efforts to make sure that the information and registration are available, we have since met the Electoral Commission again, and I have subsequently written to the commission expressing my desire and that of the House that everything possible be done to make sure that servicemen and women get their opportunity to vote and asking the commission to give us any recommendations it may have to ensure that that is the case.

Tim Loughton: May I also welcome the Secretary of State? I trust that he greeted his appointment with more enthusiasm than he did when he was sent to the Department of Health previously. When so many of our service personnel are promoting and protecting democracy around the world, particularly in Iraq, it is ironic, as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said, and worrying that we received reports that so many of them were disfranchised and prevented from voting in the general election. I am rather alarmed at the complacency that the right hon. Gentleman seems to express, which is at odds with the reports that have come to us from our constituents throughout the country. In view of that and in view of the fact that the comments of the Prime Minister in February, when he said that he personally would look into the matter, seem to have come to nothing, will the Secretary of State now offer to set up

an inquiry to see how so few service personnel were entitled to vote and what can be done in the future to make sure that many more of them participate?

John Reid: If what the hon. Gentleman says is true—

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is true.

John Reid: The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) may shout from a sedentary position, but we have not received one complaint.

Mr. Gray: I have.

John Reid: If the hon. Gentleman has received a complaint, I invite him to let us know its specific nature, because I am as keen as any other hon. Member to make sure that the people who are defending democratic rights are not deprived of their own democratic rights. My officials have informed me that I have not received a single representation on that point from a serving member of the armed forces, although we have heard from politicians. There is no easy way to calculate the number of personnel who have registered—servicemen and women have had extended rights to register either as ordinary citizens or as servicemen and women since 2000—so an inquiry would not fulfil any useful purpose.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May I disagree with my right hon. Friend's final point? A pattern is starting to emerge—the people who have complained have done so only to the Conservative party.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford) (LD): And us.

Andrew Miller: And to other Opposition parties. Is the story a Conservative urban myth? If it is an urban myth, it must be scotched once and for all. My right hon. Friend is right that service personnel deserve every possible support to ensure that they can vote. I accept my right hon. Friend's explanation and think that the story should be scotched once and for all.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): Where is the question?

John Reid: I think that my hon. Friend whispered, "Does my right hon. Friend agree", beneath his breath as he sat down. [*Laughter.*] I am not accusing anyone of anything. If a problem exists, I want to tackle it, which is why we have not been complacent. Following the Prime Minister's statement, we launched an unprecedented information campaign in conjunction with the Electoral Commission. Since the election, my officials have met the Electoral Commission, which I have invited to help us make future information campaigns even more informative. If there is anything that we can do, we will do it, because we are not in the least bit complacent about our servicemen and women's rights.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Many Royal Irish Regiment soldiers are based in Northern Ireland and live at civilian addresses in Northern Ireland. Given the security situation, is my right hon. Friend satisfied with the arrangements that allow personnel to register at their civilian addresses in order to vote in general elections?

John Reid: Like the hon. Gentleman, we are always aware of the threat to our troops. No one has been forced to register from their own address. It is true that restrictions for servicemen and women on, for example, the wearing of uniform have been relaxed in recent years, which is one of the benefits of the easing of tension in Northern Ireland, but we are constantly vigilant. I stress the point that servicemen and women do not need to register at their own addresses, because they can register through the service scheme.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): May I suggest a solution? I have received many representations from officers who are serving as far afield as the Falklands and who are based in my constituency—the matter also concerns personnel serving in Germany, where spouses have also been affected. Because ballot papers cannot be sent out until they are printed, which cannot occur until the close of nominations, the Royal Mail and the British Forces Post Office are unlikely to be able to deliver ballot papers to those serving in far away places. Will the Secretary of State examine the possibility of a controlled trial of electronic voting for Her Majesty's forces?

John Reid: Notwithstanding any inconsistencies, the hon. Gentleman is genuinely trying to make a useful and constructive suggestion. Despite our efforts, I am aware that some personnel were disappointed by the late arrival of postal ballots. I will consider any means within the democratic process that ensures that servicemen and women have their democratic rights. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to examine his particular suggestion, I will do so along with any other constructive suggestions.

Mr. Robathan: First, I associate my colleagues on this side of the House with the tributes that the Secretary of State paid to the two dead British servicemen, not least because one of them came from my former battalion.

I suggest to the Secretary of State, who is not normally reticent in coming forward, that the next time he visits an Army base, a ship or whatever, he asks some of the young soldiers whether they were registered to vote. He will understand that they are slightly reticent in coming forward with objections about how they are treated because they fear that they may be discriminated against and punished, so why does not he ask them? He says that the Government have made unprecedented efforts, but I quote to him the former Minister, Ivor Caplin, who said on 20 January in this House that

"the simple fact is that it is not as bad as it seems."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2005; Vol. 429, c. 1002.]

He was quite right—it was much worse, as huge numbers of service personnel were not registered. Will the Secretary of State find out how many were not registered and how many of those serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and on the high seas were able to vote, and change the system to ensure that they are properly registered and have a proper proxy vote if need be when they are abroad?

John Reid: The hon. Gentleman's decibel level reminds me of the Jesuit who noted on his sermon, next to the bits that he did not believe, "Shout louder." Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that I have raised the issue with servicemen and women, not only here, but on ships, as he says, on aircraft carriers, and in Baghdad and in Basra. He ought to be careful in what he says. He asks, "Why not ask them if they were registered"? Whether a person registers is entirely different from whether a person has the opportunity to register. In this country, it is one's right to register or not to register, depending on the circumstances. *[Interruption.]* I accept that it is a legal requirement, but it is not a failure on the part of the Government if one chooses not to register; it is a failure on the part of the Government if one is not given the opportunity to register. What Opposition Members have been saying—and I am asking them for information—is that servicemen from all three services were not given the opportunity to register. If there are anecdotes and concrete examples of people saying not only that they did not register but that they were not given the opportunity to register, I have already said that I will look into them.

Mr. Gray: I am able to give the Secretary of State a very precise example. Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Dunn, the commanding officer of 9 Supply Regiment at Buckley barracks in my constituency, tells me that large numbers of his people in 9 Supply Regiment were unable to vote because they were not registered. When they inquired about why they were not registered, they were told that it was because the houses that were inside the wire were not eligible for registration. Lieutenant-Colonel Dunn was told that even had he wished to register he was unable to do so. Will the Secretary of State look into the specific case of Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Dunn and the soldiers of 9 Supply Regiment at Buckley barracks?

John Reid: Yes, I certainly will; I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving us some specific cases to consider.

Kosovo

2. **Mr. Edward Garnier** (Harborough) (Con): If he will make a statement on the deployment of UK troops in Kosovo. [1917]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The UK contribution to the NATO KFOR mission continues to be around 200 troops, providing a highly effective force element able to deploy across the whole of Kosovo. In addition, around 70 Ministry of Defence police officers are stationed in Kosovo, working with the UN interim administrative mission and the Kosovo police service on a wide range of international policing tasks.

Mr. Garnier: As the Minister knows, later this summer there will be high-level talks about the final status of Kosovo. That is bound to lead to greater tension in the area and may possibly lead to calls for increased British military presence in Kosovo. If that does follow, where will the troops come from?

Mr. Ingram: From the resources that have been allocated for that purpose. In 2004, notwithstanding the fact that there were 17,500 NATO troops based there, we had to strengthen the resolve on the streets to ensure that the growing tension at that time did not come to anything. We were very successful on that occasion. We had the same stand-by facility in 2005, although the situation did not materialise on this occasion, and we will stand ready to provide whatever assistance is required if the circumstances demand it.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to congratulate the British forces who are in Kosovo on the excellent job that they are doing to protect the minority there against attacks such as we saw in 2004? Can he assure the House that there will be close co-ordination with the British-led EUFOR force in Bosnia with regard to rapid deployment if it becomes necessary as a result of a breakdown of this process, which I hope will succeed, but am not very optimistic about, in the next few months?

Mr. Ingram: As ever, my hon. Friend is very knowledgeable about the circumstances prevailing in the area.

The final-status negotiations clearly have the potential to create problems, and we must be ready to deal with them, not just in Kosovo but elsewhere in the region. As for the specific question about where the troops will come from, there is—as I have said—a significant force presence in any event, in the form of NATO. We are building capabilities nationally as well to deal with some of the domestic issues that could arise, but we have invested a great deal in the region, and we want to ensure that it is a success. The flexibility of the forces is something to which we are used in the United Kingdom, and if there is a need to do as my hon. Friend suggests, it will of course be taken into consideration.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): Bearing in mind our commitment to Kosovo and, indeed, the troop deployments that we have around the globe, is the Secretary of State satisfied that we have sufficient forces to deal with any resurgent Argentine claim over the Falkland Islands?

Mr. Ingram: First, I am not the Secretary of State, although I may speak with the same accent. Secondly, perhaps the hon. Gentleman could spell out his great fears. If we chased newspaper headlines, we would be deploying troops all over the globe; but yes, if a real threat arises, we will stand resolute to defend our interests in the Falklands.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): By what method do the Government intend to ascertain the view of the House of Commons about the future status of Kosovo, given that no Select Committees are sitting, that none are likely to sit for many weeks, and that the long summer recess will follow? What discussions has the Minister had with his friends in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to establish how it will be possible to gauge the view of the House of Commons—or, indeed, inform the House of Commons of Her Majesty's Government's view on the final status of Kosovo, as we do not know what it is?

Mr. Ingram: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be able to ask that question of the lead Department, but I suspect that he has embarked on one of his campaigns involving asking every Minister in every Department about the Select Committee issue. I well understand his concern about the need for scrutiny in the House, and will convey it to my colleagues who are responsible for such matters.

Future Carrier Programme

4. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): If he will make a statement on the future carrier programme.

[1919]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): The future aircraft carrier programme is in the assessment phase. To ensure that we provide the best long-term value for money and deliver the carriers to time and cost, work continues to mature our cost, schedule, risk and design information in preparation for the main investment decision.

Stephen Hammond: Following the 100-day review of the carrier programme, which I believe is due to conclude this Friday, can the Minister confirm that cost, size and in-time date have not changed? Can he also confirm that the plans for the two 50,000-tonne carriers due to be delivered in 2012 and 2015 have not changed, and that the carriers will not be behind time, above budget and built in French dockyards?

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman has demonstrated his knowledge up to a point. A review is under way, and is due to report soon—possibly by the end of the week. The purpose of the 100-day action or assessment plan was to consider a range of issues such as size, shape, design, cost and timing, and their implications. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman should wait for the report, which has been subject to intensive discussions/ negotiations with the companies involved.

I hope that, new Member as he is, the hon. Gentleman will also recognise that we must learn the lessons of past Tory Administrations, under which many projects were over cost and over time. We have introduced new measures to try to ensure maximum efficiency, and to de-risk the early stages of any procurement stream.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that newspaper reports that French shipyards could play a part in building our new aircraft carriers are misleading? Will he fiercely resist any such schemes by ensuring that he is as much inclined towards British defence manufacturing as the French are towards theirs?

Mr. Ingram: My hon. Friend has knowledge of this matter from his membership of the previous Defence Select Committee and from his own constituency interests. I am sure that he recognises the advantages of sharing benefits with one of our allies, in terms of their needs as well as ours. There might well be opportunities for increased build at British shipyards. It is right that we continue to discuss this with our French allies. They have a need, and we have a need, so let us see if there can be some mutual benefit in this.

Peter Viggers (Gosport) (Con): Bearing in mind that the Ministry of Defence incurred a cost overrun of £127 million on a contract of £148 million with Swan Hunter for the construction of two vessels—a cost overrun that the Ministry initially denied—that Swan Hunter was the largest single donor to the yes campaign for a north-east assembly, and that the only fixed star in this muddled contract seems to be that the carriers must be assembled in Rosyth, will the Minister give the House an undertaking that the carrier contract will be conducted in a manner that represents the best interests of the armed forces and the taxpayer, and not used as a job creation scheme for Labour constituencies?

Mr. Ingram: Given that the hon. Gentleman has been campaigning for the closure of Swan Hunter, I do not think that he has the interests of the shipbuilding industry at heart. We have a major commitment to shipbuilding in this country, in regard not only to the aircraft carriers but to the Type 45s and the Astute programme, which will ensure thousands of jobs. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman look at the history of previous Conservative Governments and the way in which they treated our shipbuilding industry.

Mr. Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend take a hard look at why the Conservatives are running a hate campaign against the shipbuilding industry on Tyneside? Will he also confirm that it is not the Government's intention to see a further loss of shipbuilding capacity in this country and then to cite loss of capacity as a reason for shipbuilding work for the Royal Navy being placed abroad?

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend knows that we are closely engaged with all the players to try to determine the best configuration of our needs, relative to the demands involved. These are not easy equations, and there are only so many procurement streams in shipbuilding at any given time, even though they may span a number of years. We have to talk to the industry to determine what it is seeking to do, and how it can give the best support to the country. Those discussions will continue until we reach the best conclusion not only for the shipbuilding industry but for the Royal Navy and the British taxpayer.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): There will be great alarm across the Royal Navy today when it hears that this essential project is continuing to be subject to such uncertainty. The assessment phase into which the carriers project has been placed has had a longer gestation period even than that of an elephant. Will the Minister confirm that the Ministry now accepts that the cost of the carriers will be £3.5 billion, not £2.9 billion? Given the reports of an £18 billion shortfall in funding for the procurement programme over the next 10 years, will he tell us where the axe is going to fall? Is it going to fall on these carriers? Will they be reduced in size? Will it fall on the joint combat aircraft, or on the future rapid effect system? The truth is that the right hon. Gentleman who speaks with the same accent as the Secretary of State has had to inherit the shambles created by his predecessor.

Mr. Ingram: We are seeking to invest £68 billion in procurement over the next 10 years. How the

hon. Gentleman can diminish that and say that the situation is a shambles and that we have no interest in a defence sector in this country is beyond me. This major procurement relates not only to the surface fleet but to the Royal Air Force and to our support for the British Army. It cannot all happen in year one, however; it has to be planned and funded. I would say that £68 billion is a considerable investment by the Government. It represents increased defence expenditure and the largest sustained increase for 20 years. We should recognise what the Government are doing to ensure that the British armed forces are given the essential equipment that they need to face the threats ahead.

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): If the speculation is correct, and one of those ships is built in France, it would be a disgrace, and would have major implications for shipyards such as Swan Hunter's in the north-east. Will the Minister deny those rumours, about which there is great speculation in the press, and confirm that British ships built with taxpayers' money will be built by British workers in British shipyards?

Mr. Ingram: I have tried to express the point that this will give us greater opportunity—*[Interruption.]* We are seeking to build two carriers, the French look as though they want to build one, which means that there are three orders, which could mean increased opportunities for British shipyards because of greater availability of work. It is therefore right that we continue to discuss the matter and examine what is the best fit for our two nations. I will not chase every comment and every lurid newspaper headline that suggest that these aircraft carriers will be built in France, as the opposite might be the case—we might have increased opportunities.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): The Minister of State knows that aircraft carriers can only be deployed into harm's way with a full escort to protect them against torpedoes, mines and so on. While he is havering about the design, time scale and everything else for our two aircraft carriers, can he tell us whether he really believes that we will have enough frigates, minesweepers and other ancillary vessels left to mount two taskforces?

Mr. Ingram: The answer to that is yes. Those implications have been taken into account in the strategic decisions. The reduction in the surface fleet, of course, is based on other considerations: the reduced submarine threat, as military experts examine it; the introduction of Type 45s with all the new equipment on board; and all the other capabilities available to give support to any embarked fleet, probably working with other nations. We would not put any of our aircraft carriers or other ships in a deployed fleet at risk.

Military Deaths (Inquests)

6. **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to provide the information necessary to hold inquests for UK armed forces personnel killed in Iraq. [1921]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Don Touhig): The Ministry of Defence co-operates fully with Her Majesty's coroners at all inquests into the deaths of UK armed forces personnel. That co-operation applies both to the provision of information and of witnesses.

On one further point, there have been a number of press reports concerning allegations of delays in holding inquests into the deaths of service personnel. I want to assure the House that the Government are committed to providing the extra funds requested to deal with the increase in service-related inquests, and that commitment was made prior to those press reports.

Mr. Todd: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The family of Russell Aston, my constituent who was killed in Al Majar Al Kabir in Iraq nearly two years ago, are anxiously awaiting the inquest and particularly keen to ensure that witnesses from the armed forces who played a role in the incident are able to be called as witnesses by the coroner to discuss the circumstances that led to his death. Equally, they wish to see pressure maintained on the Iraqi authorities to ensure that Iraqi witnesses can attend, too. Can he assure me that both of those steps will be taken as far as they are within his powers?

Mr. Touhig: I recognise the role that my hon. Friend has played in supporting Corporal Aston's family at a difficult time. The only thing that can be worse than losing a loved one is not to know the circumstances in which that person died. The Oxfordshire coroner, Mr. Gardiner, will hold the inquest into the deaths of the six members of the Royal Military Police who died in Iraq in June 2003. This Department has co-operated fully with the coroner and will continue to do so. We have provided Mr. Gardiner with the board of inquiry report and the service police report into the incident. There will be a lot more contact between the Ministry of Defence and the coroner during the inquest. He will inform us of the information that he requires and of those to whom he would like to talk. If we can proactively provide him with information that we think might be useful, we will do so. The special investigations branch of the Royal Military Police will also provide existing statements from Iraqi witnesses if required to do so.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): The Minister will be aware that more than half our dead heroes have yet to have inquests mounted into their deaths. From his earlier answers, I am sure that he will be aware of the effect on the grieving families. Will he tell the House how that has been allowed to happen and assure the House that those circumstances will be brought to an end?

Mr. Touhig: The whole House shares the hon. Gentleman's concerns, but the timing and findings of inquests are, rightly, a matter for coroners themselves, and I recognise that the policy of bringing home all British casualties through RAF Brize Norton has resulted in a very heavy work load for Mr. Gardiner, the Oxfordshire coroner.

In the case to which my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) referred, I understand that the coroner was able to release the bodies to the families as quickly as possible.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has been concerned about press reports that there have been delays in holding inquests, and he has therefore written to the families to reassure them. The Government have made it clear that we will provide the extra funds needed so that those inquests can be carried out as quickly as possible. The Ministry of Defence is providing every help and assistance to the coroner and will continue to do so, so that the families can get to know the evidence and circumstances in which those lads died.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State knows, because I have written to him, that the previous Secretary of State saw Beverley Clarke, the mother of young David Clarke, who was killed in his tank in Iraq in March 2003, about the delay in a specialist investigation into the circumstances of his death. May I urge the Minister to ensure that those investigations are completed as soon as possible so that we can start to release information to the relatives?

Mr. Touhig: I am aware of my hon. Friend's point, and I will certainly look into that matter further and ensure that everything is being done to speed up the process of gathering the information. If it will help him, I will meet him or communicate with him to update him on what progress has been made.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to the armed forces personnel who have so courageously given their lives in the cause of rebuilding a democratic Iraq? I realise that the Minister is not the Secretary of State and may not therefore be able to answer the question that I will ask, in which case I will accept a letter. I hope that the Government, in giving the information that has been asked for, will explain what the task being required of personnel in Iraq is. The Government have referred previously to staying there until "our job is done"—those were the words of the previous Secretary of State. Does that refer to the job of training and handing over to Iraqi internal security forces in the whole of Iraq, or just in the British-controlled area? If the latter, does that mean that, once the job is done in multinational division south-east, and whatever is happening in the rest of Iraq, our troops will come home?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I dislike interrupting the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but that goes far beyond the question on the Order Paper.

Darfur

7. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): What support NATO plans to give to the African Union peace mission in Darfur. [1922]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): The United Kingdom strongly supports the expansion of the African Union mission in Darfur. NATO is working closely with the African Union and with the United Nations and the EU to clarify key logistical needs in Darfur in order to put together coherent proposals for practical assistance. I shall discuss the issue with other NATO Ministers at our meeting later this week.

Hugh Bayley: I welcome the support that the UK Government and NATO are giving to the African Union mission. When I was in Darfur earlier this year as a member of the Select Committee on International Development, I saw, at one end of each of the runways in Darfur where we landed, camouflage-painted Government of Sudan attack helicopters, MiG fighters and other military planes, and, at the other end of each runway, white-painted UN and Africa Union humanitarian planes. I welcome NATO's provision of additional air power to the African Union, but surely that must be accompanied by international efforts to have Sudanese planes grounded, because there cannot be peace in Darfur as long as Government of Sudan planes are bombing Sudanese people in Sudanese villages in Darfur.

John Reid: There is no doubt that my hon. Friend's concern is shared not only throughout the UK but throughout the world. That is why we have tried to provide vehicles and equipment, as well as the humanitarian aid of which my hon. Friend will be aware as a member of the International Development Committee. We do not believe that enough has been done, and as recently as a week ago I discussed what more aid we can provide through the EU to the African Union in its mission. At the end of the week, I will do exactly the same with ministerial colleagues at NATO. My hon. Friend can be assured that we take this matter very seriously and want to provide whatever resources we can under the leadership of the African Union.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Egypt is generally seen as the major military power in the area. Does the Secretary of State have plans to meet his Egyptian counterpart to try to put more pressure on Egypt to take a leading role in trying to secure peace in Darfur?

John Reid: I have no plans at present to visit Egypt. However, I will bring the hon. Gentleman's suggestion to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. Speaking from memory, I would say that the troops under the leadership of the African Union do not include Egyptian troops at this stage. We are trying to make sure that we can put in strategic heavy lift vehicles, resources and equipment to make sure that the four nations, who are bent on increasing the numbers of peacekeepers in the African Union-led force from around 3,000 to 6,000, will be capable of doing the job that they have been asked to do.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I have been listening carefully to my right hon. Friend's response and am pleased with much of it, but are we going to wait for more than 10 years, as we did in the Balkans, for a peacekeeping force to prove its capability? In the Balkans, tens of thousands of Muslims were murdered before we deployed there after 10 years. Is not it time to consider a full deployment now in Darfur?

John Reid: I fully understand the urgency that my hon. Friend impresses upon us, but it would be misleading to suggest that we have not done anything thus far. The UK has pledged more than £14 million through the military side and 600 vehicles, as well as about £94.5 million in humanitarian assistance. Because of the urgency of the situation, I recently discussed the provision of further support to the mission at Darfur with fellow EU Defence Ministers, as well as with the EU high representative and the NATO Secretary-General at the meeting in Brussels on 23 May. Later this week, I will discuss the matter with NATO Ministers to put flesh on the bones of the promises that we have made at the request of the African Union to give it the resources to deal with the matter, but I stress that the process should be led by the African Union itself.

Nuclear Deterrent

8. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West) (Con): Whether it is his policy to replace Trident with a new generation of strategic nuclear deterrent. [1923]

10. **Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): Whether the decision has been taken in principle in favour of a new generation strategic nuclear deterrent. [1925]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): Labour's recent general election manifesto spelled out our commitment to the retention of the independent nuclear deterrent. However, as I confirmed to the House on 18 May, no decision on any replacement for Trident has been taken, either in principle or otherwise.

Mr. Swayne: The Secretary of State will be aware that last year's White Paper stated categorically that a decision on the replacement for Trident would need to be taken in the lifetime of this Parliament. Does he agree with that, and does he still believe in the principle that Britain should continue to hold a nuclear deterrent so long as others do so?

John Reid: The answer to the first question is yes, and the answer to the second is that I have already answered it by reading out our manifesto commitment, which made it clear that we are committed to retaining an independent nuclear deterrent.

Mark Pritchard: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but I am rather intrigued by its vagueness. My question on the Order Paper is quite clear in referring to the principle. Will the Secretary of State therefore underline again the Government's view of the principle—not the platform or the technology—of the UK having its own nuclear deterrent? Despite the unilateralists on the Government Benches behind him, I hope that he will reassure the House by saying yes to that principle.

John Reid: I can do no better than read out my initial answer. It must be my accent that has troubled the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* Incidentally, I take great offence at the comparison between my accent and the Minister of State's, as mine is much posher than his. I have been modelling myself for years on the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), who is in his place, as he so often is for defence debates.

Let me repeat my first answer: Labour's recent general election manifesto spelled out our commitment to the retention of the independent nuclear deterrent. If the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) is still intrigued, I can read out our manifesto. Given his suspicions of anyone who fails to mention or who is against nuclear weapons, it may be even more intriguing for the House if I read out the Conservative party manifesto. There is no mention of nuclear weapons at all in that. I searched for some reference to them, but found only the brilliant analysis that the world is obviously more dangerous—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that we can all read party manifestos in our leisure time.

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Are not nuclear weapons macho politics for the countries that want them, but extremely dangerous if many countries adopt the same attitude? The former US Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, is in Parliament today. Does the Secretary of State agree with him that human fallibility and nuclear weapons mean the destruction of nations? Will not a new generation of nuclear weapons blow apart our obligations to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and make future international agreement unachievable?

John Reid: I sincerely hope not, and I take my hon. Friend's point about the great danger of proliferation. That is why, during the strategic defence review, which I had the honour to chair under the noble Lord Robertson, we diminished the number of our warheads, reduced the targeting of those warheads and reduced the number of Trident submarines at sea at any time. It is also why we have been supportive on the non-proliferation treaty and expressed disappointment that, despite our efforts, we did not make further advances in the recent period of that treaty. I can assure my hon. Friend that anything we do in future will be fully consistent with our obligations under the NPT.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend outline some of the key milestones in the lead-up to this important decision, and will he ensure that the interests of those who work in Devonport dockyard are listened to with care?

John Reid: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and promise that, as ever, I will listen with great care to anyone connected with Devonport. I have to say that it is a little too early to highlight particular milestones, other than to say that the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) was right to suggest that a decision will have to be taken during the course of this Parliament, although the decision we take—whether we modify, replace, update or diminish Trident—will not take effect in the course of this Parliament. Indeed, that lies some decades ahead.

Mr. Michael Moore (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (LD): On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I join the Secretary of State in passing on our condolences to the families and friends of servicemen who have recently given their lives while serving this country.

The strategic nuclear deterrent has been a crucial aspect of Britain's defences in the post-war period, and we continue to support it. We recognise that there are rapidly changing threats to the United Kingdom and the rest of the world, not least the danger of proliferation of nuclear weapons. As the Government consider the possible replacement of Trident, and in the aftermath of the failure of the review conference for the non-proliferation treaty, will the Secretary of State make it clear how the UK will take forward its obligations under article 6, and will he tell us how he will implement the Government's welcome manifesto pledge to put an end to the international network of trade in weapons of mass destruction?

John Reid: Our record illustrates the lengths to which we are prepared to go to stand against that trade, potential or otherwise, or the coming together of terrorist groups and weapons of mass destruction. To be asked about a resolution of that question from the Liberal Benches surprises me, however. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been deeply involved in dealing with the general arms trade, and I think that we will get a fruitful outcome.

The hon. Gentleman makes a legitimate point about the relationship between our continuing consideration of the retention of our independent nuclear deterrent and our NPT obligations. I assure him, as I assured my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) a second ago, that before we take any decision on our independent nuclear deterrent, we will need to look at a range of options, including the different ways in which new systems might provide deterrence. There are also options for extending the life of elements of the existing system. I assure the hon. Gentleman that all those will be considered in the context of the prevailing international situation and our NPT obligations.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that a replacement for Trident would be compatible with our obligations under the non-proliferation treaty?

John Reid: As a general statement, it could be—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members, who could not spend even three words in their manifesto discussing this important issue, laugh at that judicious use of words. Of course we have to use our words judiciously. To my hon. Friend, I say that the answer depends on what we do: if we replace the existing system with a massive increase in our capability, that may not be compatible; if we reduce capability, that may well be compatible. So the answer to the question is precisely as I said: it could well be in line with our existing obligations.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Am I alone in having detected in the Secretary of State's first answer a slight contradiction? He quoted the manifesto as stating that his party believed in the continuation of the nuclear deterrent, but went on to say that no decision had been taken in principle on that very matter. The question that he was asked, and on which my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) was right to press him, was whether in principle the Government think that this country should continue to possess nuclear weapons as long as other countries have them. Do not the contributions of his colleagues the hon. Members for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) and for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) show the sort of difficulties that he will run into if he accepts such a principle? As for the Conservative position, I refer the Secretary of State to early-day motion 149, which enunciates that principle. Will he sign it and encourage his colleagues to sign it?

John Reid: I am sure that the whole nation is reassured by the fact that when it went to the polls assuming that there was no nuclear policy it could have referred to early-day motion 149, which outlines one. The hon. Gentleman has been a strong supporter of our independent nuclear deterrent over many years, and I have discussed many issues with him, but he perceives wrongly if he perceives a contradiction in my first two statements. I said first, that our manifesto commits the Labour Government to the retention of our independent nuclear deterrent, and secondly, that we had not taken a decision in principle about the replacement of the existing system because that decision, in principle and in practice, must await the outcome of our deliberations, considerations and analysis. I said that that would happen in the context of prevailing international conditions and our obligations under the NPT. He should therefore be in no doubt that the two statements are not contradictory in any way.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State, and his accent, to his new position, but I remind him of the recent opinion poll indicating that 78 per cent. of Scots are opposed to the replacement of Trident. In a time of procurement overspends and cuts in the Navy, the Air Force and the Army, why do the Government not fully fund conventional defence, rather than wasting £20 billion on weapons of mass destruction?

John Reid: I am too emollient a character to point out that 82 per cent. of Scots are opposed to the SNP, but that has not persuaded the hon. Gentleman of the wrongness of his position. Of course we listen carefully to opinion polls, but the prevailing message from them over many decades is that if people are asked whether, as long as other nations have a nuclear deterrent, this nation should retain one, some two thirds of the population consistently say yes. I have made plain the terms of our manifesto commitment to the retention of an independent nuclear deterrent. I have also made it plain that we have taken no decisions in principle or in practice about the replacement of the existing system. The hon. Gentleman will have to await further discussions, and it may be useful to wait until we have given the matter some consideration before demanding answers from me.

Fleet Air Defence

9. **Mr. Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): If he will make a statement on fleet air defence. [1924]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mr. Adam Ingram): Royal Navy task groups employ comprehensive layered air defences based on a mix of early warning and protection systems. The type and

number of systems deployed on particular operations are matched to the size of the task group and the risks it faces. In multinational operations, all the countries involved contribute to the mutual defence of the task group. We have proved the effectiveness of layered air defence in national and multinational exercises and during operations.

Mr. Prisk: I thank the Minister for that reply. However, given that the last Sea Harrier squadron will be scrapped next year and that the Type 45 to which he referred will not come into force until 2009, that reply means that the Royal Navy will be without its own air cover for at least three years, and possibly six. Does not that show that despite all the spin from the Ministry of Defence, air defence for the fleet will, under this Government, be outsourced to the Pentagon?

Mr. Ingram: The threat to a task force is likely to come from fast sea-skimming missiles, and Sea Harriers were not designed to counter that threat. Sea Harriers form only one element of the Royal Navy's comprehensive layered air defence capability, which includes Sea Dart and Sea Wolf missiles, close-in weapons systems and decoys. We have debated the issue off and on since the decision was taken, but another factor is that it would have been very costly to upgrade the Sea Harriers and even possibly not technically achievable. That was never addressed by the hon. Gentleman's party when it considered the issue, so much money might have been spent to no real effect.

EU Military Capability

11. **Mr. David Jones** (Clwyd, West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with EU Defence Ministers on improving EU military capabilities. [1926]

12. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with EU Defence Ministers on steps to improve EU military capabilities. [1927]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): This issue was discussed at the meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council and at the Ministers' meeting of the European Defence Agency, both on 23 May. I shall be discussing military capabilities with NATO Ministers on Thursday and Friday.

Mr. Jones: Given that France has a new Prime Minister who, to put it charitably, was less than supportive of British troops in Iraq, does the Secretary of State agree that it is essential that we should resist all back-door attempts that may be made by thwarted European interests—in the light of the effective dismantling of the European constitution, about which we shall soon hear—to introduce a dangerous common defence policy?

John Reid: That is a particularly churlish remark on the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar, when we are attempting to bring nations together. As far as the constitution is concerned, the hon. Gentleman would do better to await the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who will address the House shortly.

On the development of European military capabilities, either through the EU or through NATO, which remains the cornerstone of our defence, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the build-up of those capabilities will proceed, irrespective of our interesting discussions on the constitution.

Andrew Rosindell: Now that we have seen the death of the European constitution, will the Secretary of State give us a cast-iron guarantee that there will be no further development of the European defence project, and particularly the European Defence Agency?

John Reid: No, I will not give the hon. Gentleman such assurances because I have made it absolutely plain throughout this Question Time that NATO is the cornerstone of our defence, but that the EU can accomplish many tasks that are complementary to NATO. In Darfur, for instance, there is no competition and no duplication but a productive working relationship between NATO and the EU to increase our capability to tackle one of those terrible, terrible humanitarian tragedies that need to be tackled by the west. I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that assurance, but I can assure him that all other points that he may want to raise on the constitution will be satisfactorily answered by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in a few moments' time.

EU Constitutional Treaty

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the EU constitutional treaty, following the no votes in referendums in France and the Netherlands last week. I shall explain why we have decided to postpone the Second Reading of the European Union Bill.

At the end of 2001, European leaders met at Laeken in Belgium to consider the future of the European Union. Just three months before, the world's sense of order had been shattered by the atrocities of 11 September.

Reviewing the progress made within the European Union over previous decades, European leaders at Laeken said that the Union

"stands at a crossroads, facing twin challenges, one within and the other beyond its borders . . . Within the Union, European institutions must be brought closer to its citizens; beyond its borders, the Union is confronted with a fast changing, globalised world."

It was that Laeken declaration which led to the Convention on the Future of Europe and to the intergovernmental conference that followed it. Negotiations in that conference were hard fought; but the United Kingdom achieved all its objectives and my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the Foreign Secretary speak.

Mr. Straw: The United Kingdom achieved all its objectives, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I therefore had no hesitation in recommending the new treaty to Parliament and to the country.

We did so not least because the European Union's organisation plainly needed reform the better to cope with the new challenges set out at Laeken, and with the enlargement to 25 member states. So the treaty includes a reduction in the size of the European Commission; a much better voting system, which benefits the UK; an end to the six-month rotating presidency, with replacement by a full-time President of the Council and team presidencies; better arrangements for involving national Parliaments in EU legislation and greater flexibility through "enhanced co-operation", to allow groups of member states to co-operate more intensively while others go at their own pace. And we kept our national veto in all key areas of concern.

On behalf of the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister and I signed the constitutional treaty in Rome on 29 October last; but, like any other EU treaty, it requires ratification by every one of the EU's member states—now 25—before it can come into force. To date, nine countries have approved the treaty through their parliamentary processes, and one—Spain—by referendum. In the last week, however, as the House and the country are very well aware, in referendums the electors in France voted no by 55 per cent. to 45 per cent., and in the Netherlands by 62 per cent. to 38 per cent.

The constitutional treaty is the property of the European Union as a whole. It is now for European leaders to reach conclusions on how to deal with the situation.

To give effect to the United Kingdom's commitment to ratify the treaty by referendum, we introduced the European Union Bill in the last Parliament, and it was given a Second Reading by the House by a majority of 215 on 9 February, but the Bill fell on the calling of the general election. It was therefore reintroduced in this new Parliament on 24 May—before either the French or Dutch referendums—and it would in normal circumstances have been scheduled for its Second Reading very shortly. However, until the consequences of France and the Netherlands being unable to ratify the treaty are clarified, it would not in our judgment now be sensible to set a date for the Second Reading.

There is also the need for further discussions with EU partners and further decisions from EU Governments. The first opportunity for collective discussion within the EU will take place at the end of next week, when Heads of State and Government meet in the European Council. We shall, of course, keep the situation under review, and ensure that the House is kept fully informed.

I should emphasise that it is not for the United Kingdom alone to decide the future of the treaty, and it remains our view that it represents a sensible new set of rules for the enlarged European Union. We reserve completely the right to bring back for consideration the Bill providing for a UK referendum should circumstances change, but we see no point in doing so at this moment.

As I commented during last week, these referendum results raise profound questions about the future direction of Europe. The EU has to come to terms with the forces of globalisation in a way that maximises prosperity, employment and social welfare. There are other large questions, too. How can we strengthen the force for good of the EU in foreign policy, along with aid to poorer countries and trade? How do we ensure value for money for our citizens and better regulation? And how do we make a reality of the widely agreed concept of subsidiarity, so that decisions are made at the lowest level possible?

All those issues have long been central to the United Kingdom's priorities for the European Union, and will be so for our EU presidency, which begins on 1 July. The continuing objective of enlargement and the issue of future financing will also be on our agenda. At the start of the presidency, I will publish the latest in our series of White Papers on the EU and make an accompanying statement to set out our priorities in more detail.

Let me conclude by saying that the European Union remains a unique and valuable achievement, central to the UK's prosperity and well-being. The world's largest single market has enabled the businesses and people of this country to earn new prosperity by trading freely across borders. European co-operation has broken down barriers to travel, work and leisure. And the EU remains a vital engine of peace, democracy and reform.

The EU does now face a period of difficulty. In working in our interests and in the Union's interests, we must not, however, act in a way that undermines the EU's strengths and the achievements of the past five decades, and we shall not do so.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I should like to thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for his usual courtesy in making a copy available in advance.

What we would have liked to see from the Government today is a little less spin and little more humility. The idea that the United Kingdom achieved all its key objectives at the intergovernmental conference or kept our national veto in all key areas of concern is a complete fantasy.

This constitution is bad for Britain and bad for Europe, and it has now been comprehensively rejected by the people of France and the Netherlands, yet the political dinosaurs at the helm in France and Germany, and the army of Eurocrats whose careers depend on the gravy train, act as though nothing at all has happened. What is it about "no" that they do not understand? I may no longer practise medicine, but I can tell a corpse when I see one, and this constitution is a case for the morgue if ever I saw one. This is a dead constitution.

What is the response of our Government? Is it to be bold and give a clear direction? No, it is, "We see no point in proceeding at this moment." What does that mean? Do they want to proceed at another moment, or soon, or never? What are they waiting for—a lead from the people of Luxembourg? What it means is that the niceties of EU diplomatic etiquette are being put before sound reason. It is not the hand of history on the Prime Minister's shoulder, but the hand of Peter Mandelson. This complacent, condescending response could have been faxed directly from the offices of Barroso, Chirac or Schröder: "Put your Bill on hold, but don't stop the process. Don't rock the Euro boat."

The Foreign Secretary said in his statement that it is not for the UK alone to decide the future of the treaty. He is wrong. Rejection by the British people would bring an end to this wretched process. The loss of the constitution is not a crisis for the people of Europe; it is an opportunity. The crisis is a crisis of leadership. While our Government dither about what to do, people in boardrooms up and down this country are trying to make investment decisions, and they want clarity and certainty. Those decisions will affect jobs and prosperity in this country, so let the Foreign Secretary give us some clarity.

Will the Government, at next week's summit, be pressing for other Governments to declare the treaty dead and bring the ratification process to an end? If not, what will our position be? What will happen to the accession talks during the period of paralysis, and what will be the status of the Bills preparing for the accession of Bulgaria and Romania? More important, will the Foreign Secretary give the House an assurance that there will be no attempt to introduce any part of this constitution by the back door, and that any further transfer of power away from the British people will result in a referendum? Will he give us an assurance that, following the summit next week, the Prime Minister will come to the House and tell us either that the treaty is dead and the ratification process is over or that we will have a referendum so that the British people can add their voice to the voices of the Dutch and the French in rejecting this dated and dangerous constitution?

Europe is having its "emperor's new clothes" moment, and the voters have seen through the self-serving agenda of Europe's ruling elite. We now need to get on with building a different Europe—a Europe that works with, not against, the instincts of nation states, and in which sovereign countries co-operate where it is in their mutual interests to do so but retain the freedom to act independently when their national interests require it.

Here in the United Kingdom, only a month after the general election, the centrepiece of the Government's foreign policy has been blown apart. This, as the Foreign Secretary pointed out, is the treaty that the Prime Minister has already signed. He negotiated it in our name, and it was at the centre of his last crusade for a continent. But we have had eight years of the Government getting it wrong on Europe. They were wrong on the euro. The Prime Minister said that

"the euro is not just about our economy but our destiny"

—some destiny! They were wrong on the social chapter, wrong to sign away our controls on immigration and asylum and wrong on this constitution. My advice to the Foreign Secretary is, "Have some courage man and declare this constitution dead".

We should all thank the Dutch and the French for their liberation from the constitution negotiated by the Prime Minister. The game is now up for Europe's political elite. The people of Europe must be the masters now.

Mr. Straw: May I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy at the beginning of his remarks, and take this opportunity—the first I have had—to congratulate him on his appointment as shadow Foreign Secretary?

I listened with very great care to what the hon. Gentleman said, and much of it seemed simply to be re-running the arguments of the election of six weeks ago, which he lost. The Conservatives made those arguments central to the election campaign in which they were comprehensively defeated. As for investment decisions and jobs, let me just remind the hon. Gentleman that this Government have one of the finest economic records of any Government in the western world and of any Government in British economic history.

Let me deal now with the questions that the hon. Gentleman raised. He asks me about our position at next week's summit. We will make judgments about our position at next week's summit—based on the statement that I have made today—much nearer the time. Meanwhile, there will be a meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council—of Foreign Ministers—on Sunday and Monday, and an opportunity for the House further to discuss the matter when we discuss the forthcoming European Council next Wednesday, 15 June.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about accession talks during this period. I am pleased to reassure him that these talks will continue. One of the leaders of one of the countries that has expressed publicly in the past some reservations about the possible accession of Turkey, Chancellor Schüssel of Austria, is himself on record as saying that he wishes the negotiations to continue, and I believe that that will be the case.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether we are intending to introduce any part of the constitution by the back door. The answer to that is no, we are not, but there is a question here—[Hon. Members: "But."] There is a but. There is a real "but" for serious Members of the House. I understand the points of engagement and of controversy about this constitution. I would have looked forward to that engagement in the country as a whole. However, many parts of the constitution were

[Mr. Straw]

reforms that were widely agreed in all parts of the House. For example, there were the proposals to give real flesh to the idea of subsidiarity, the proposals to give national Parliaments a new and better say over EU legislation, and the proposals to provide for yellow cards.

If the Commission or the Council were themselves to suggest that we should introduce these things by other means, it would be absurd to put such proposals to a referendum. We ought to agree to them straight away.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes) (Con): Ah.

Mr. Straw: Of course we should. Is it seriously being suggested from the Opposition Front Bench that proposals that happen to be in the constitution but could, I hope, be introduced in any event in a separate way, which would strengthen the role of this national Parliament, must go to a referendum? That is an absurd position, and exposes the vacuity of the Opposition's position.

We are not proposing that this constitutional treaty—the only constitutional treaty before Europe or before this country—should be agreed by this country save by a referendum.

Mr. Robin Cook (Livingston) (Lab): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on striking the difficult balance of making it clear that the Dutch and French referendums have derailed the constitution without using language that would enable the Dutch and French Governments to blame him for being the obstacle that caused the crash? I believe that my right hon. Friend's statement achieved that balance very well.

This was the fourth major attempt in 15 years to rewrite the treaties. Would we not have had a better chance of getting a yes vote last week if, instead, leaders had focused on delivering the promise of full employment that we gave in Lisbon five years ago? If we really want to reconnect Europe with the peoples, should not the first priority of the forthcoming British presidency be to deliver on that promise rather than attempting a fifth rewriting of the treaties?

Mr. Straw: I fully share my right hon. Friend's central tenet—that the test of the EU has to be its outcomes and not its process. I would say that we wanted the change of process that is contained within the constitution not for its own sake but so that the outcomes could be better and more quickly implemented. In France, for example—and of course no means no; I am not trying to dissect the no vote—the surveys of "no" voters show that their concerns were as much domestic as they were European. Above all, there are concerns about problems of unemployment in France. There were similar but different concerns inside the Netherlands. Delivering on outcomes has always been our top priority in Europe, as it has been in the UK. I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend that ensuring a real delivery throughout Europe on Lisbon—on which we, the UK, have delivered—is essential.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): Does the Foreign Secretary accept now that it is necessary for the Government to put themselves not only at the heart of Europe but at its head as well, and that UK leadership has never been more important, both at home and throughout the EU, than it is at the moment?

If we accept that there is no chance of the French or Dutch Governments seeking fresh endorsement from their citizens, and if we agree, as many of us do, that it would be at best quixotic to ask the British people to endorse a treaty that will not come into force, will the Foreign Secretary take the opportunity this afternoon to do two things? First, will he reaffirm the Government's belief that issues such as climate change, terrorism, the middle east, Iran and trade with the United States can only be dealt with successfully through a concerted European Union approach? Secondly, will he commit the Government to every available measure to enhance transparency, subsidiarity and access—none of which require treaty changes?

Mr. Straw: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his comments, which I accept. Of course he is right to say that we are much stronger when we work with our European partners—especially on Iran, but on climate change, Africa, the middle east, terrorism and other issues as well—and weaker when we do not, as we discovered in relation to Iraq.

The principal Opposition party needs to make a choice. Yes, they disagreed with the constitution. However, if we care about the UK's role in the world and our prosperity, it is crucial that we do not use the fact of the rejection of the treaty by France and the Netherlands to undermine the real benefits that the EU as a whole has brought us.

On his second point I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. He knows that, separately from the treaty negotiations, I introduced proposals for consideration and decision by this House, the better to enable it and the other place to scrutinise European legislation properly.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Lanark and Hamilton, East) (Lab): What surprises me is that some people are surprised by the result of the French referendum. Everyone inside the Elysée palace, including the president's cat, knew that the referendum was heading for the buffers. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that the Convention that produced the draft treaty was a French idea, led by a former French president, which has now been summarily dismissed by the French people? The treaty is dead; let us now put it to rest and, as my right hon. Friend suggests, move on. I hope that next week's Heads of State and Government meeting will do just that. We must not start to discuss things that are now behind us. The treaty has failed and we need to go forward.

Mr. Straw: The constitution was generated by the whole Convention, which included a very large number of representatives, including some from this Parliament and the Government. The decisions of the intergovernmental conference were made by the whole IGC and agreed unanimously. It is therefore quite wrong to suggest that responsibility for the constitution lies at the door of any one member state. We are all responsible for it. The Prime Minister and I would not have recommended it to the

House unless we thought—as we still do—that it would be beneficial to the United Kingdom. None the less, I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Listening to the Foreign Secretary is like watching a laboratory rat running from one electric probe to another, shocked and dithering all over the place. Will he answer a simple question? His Government extolled the virtues of the treaty—they said that it was right. Now, he must either come to the Dispatch Box and say that the treaty is dead; or, if it is not dead, he should let the British people have their vote and kill it off.

Mr. Straw: Everyone knows the reality after the French and Dutch referendums, but it is not for any one country alone to make a decision on the future of the treaty. That is for the European Council.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his thoughtful and measured statement. That contrasted with the Opposition spokesman's statement, which was delivered with great passion but had no content whatever. When my right hon. Friend meets his colleagues, will he keep two things in mind? First, what the Dutch and French referendums showed is that the old division between the so-called British Eurosceptics and the Franco-German motor no longer exists. The question is which countries and which economies are fit for Europe. Secondly, Ministers should remember not to spend all their time arguing over the rulebook. At some stage they will have to sit down again and write a rulebook. The one thing they need to consider is whether power is exercised at the appropriate level. I agree with my right hon. Friend's call for greater subsidiarity, but at some stage we must revisit the question whether some of the powers currently exercised in one place would not be more appropriately exercised in another, in the interests of economic efficiency.

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend too for that thoughtful question. I take note of her first point. She says, and she was a member representing this Parliament on the Convention, that a stage will be reached when the rulebook will have to be revised. I remind the House that it is because the existing rulebook is to be found in four overlapping treaties and was designed for an EU of six initial member states that it had to be revised. At some stage in the future, if the constitution does not go ahead, some of the changes that the Convention and the IGC faced will have to be faced by Europe, if it is to operate effectively and efficiently. But I take my hon. Friend's point about the need for power to be exercised at an appropriate level. There is no doubt about that. The issue of subsidiarity—of decisions being made at the lowest level possible—has been a long-standing concern of the Government and is one that we shall pursue.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): The European constitution has been consigned to the political dustbin, but the problem remains of a European Union that is wasteful, remote and bureaucratic and lacks popular support. Why did the Foreign Secretary not tackle those problems before he signed the constitution, and will he now apologise for that? Will he transfer his recent enthusiasm for the constitution to searching instead for a simple democratic Europe closer to its citizens, and will he publish his proposals in a White Paper during the British presidency of the European Union?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Gentleman also sat as one of the House's representatives on the Convention and well understands the document. Part of the purpose of the Laeken declaration and of the constitution was to deal with what he describes as the bureaucracy of the EU. That was why, for example, far from the constitution recommending an increase in the number of Commissioners to cope with the increase in the number of member states, it proposed and recommended a decrease. It is also why it proposed a much simplified voting system—one in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom, I may say, without any question—in place of the convoluted formula that was agreed at Nice. To re-emphasise the point, it contains tangible proposals to improve the way in which this national Parliament and every other national Parliament could scrutinise EU-proposed draft laws. All those were beneficial, and in my judgment—and this is why no apology arises—would have been better for the UK and better for Europe, and far from leading to more waste would have led to less waste, a streamlined organisation, and what my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) was speaking about—better and more effective outcomes for the citizens of Europe.

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North) (Lab): There are many people in this country and throughout Europe who have a fear of competitive nationalism. They remember what happened in the 1930s, when economic and political instability wrecked Europe. I very much welcome the approach that my right hon. Friend announced to the House, and the fact that the British Government will take a measured approach at the Brussels summit. Will my right hon. Friend continue with that approach as we prepare for the British presidency? I look forward to hearing from him next week, when he may give us a greater flavour of some of the proposals that he intends to put forward.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right. When we argue about the constitutional treaty—the argument is perfectly understandable—we should be certain not to damage the progress that the EU has made in securing, above all, peace between continental states whose histories are written in blood rather than words and unparalleled prosperity. We should not lose sight of that point in future discussions.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that those who made the test should stand by it? Those who legislated for the way in which the treaty would have been ratified want to change the law now that events have gone against them. How can the people of Europe believe in politicians who do not live up to their promises? Given that the ballot box has spoken loudly in France and even more loudly in the Netherlands, why are some people in Europe

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

preaching, "We must obey the law. We must obey the test."? They are trying to undermine what they said was everyone else's duty.

Mr. Straw: I answer for the British Government, not other Governments. In my statement, I spelled out the position on ratification, which is also set out in one of the articles of part IV of the constitution. Each member state must ratify the treaty by their own national procedures. In some cases—nine so far—those national procedures have been parliamentary. In three cases so far—Spain, the Netherlands and France—the national procedures have involved referendums. I have heard a lot of speculation about the future decisions that the European Council might make on the treaty's future, but I have not heard it suggested that Heads of State, Heads of Government or Foreign Ministers are seeking to undermine their own law or EU law.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that people in the Common Market and, latterly, the European Union have from time to time overreached themselves in trying to sell a package from the top down? For example, they almost went a bridge too far when the then Tory Government signed the Maastricht treaty. I voted against the European Union Bill on Third Reading because, once again, they had stretched the limits. From the moment that Giscard d'Estaing introduced this cock-eyed constitution, I have thought "Perhaps they have gone too far this time." Will the Foreign Secretary tell Chirac and Schröder that we will not go down the road that they are suggesting? Will he send them a copy of Monty Python's dead parrot sketch—it is deceased; it is kaput; it is no more?

Mr. Straw: I understand that this afternoon's proceedings are being followed quite closely across Europe, but, for greater accuracy, I shall ensure that copies of the full proceedings, including my hon. Friend's remarks, are made available to Heads of State and Foreign Ministers.

In this country, we have strongly supported enlargement on a bipartisan basis. In my judgment, EU enlargement was essential, and it is a further achievement of the EU. Without it, those countries in eastern Europe that were not formerly democracies would not have emerged as quickly or as effectively from the shadow of the Soviet bloc and developed into fully operational democracies with the prospect of prosperity. I repeat that we can argue about the constitutional treaty, but in so doing, we should not damage the fabric of the EU.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): As someone who spoke on Second Reading of the European Union Bill and voted in favour of it, I add my opinion that it is common sense not to reintroduce it to this House or to proceed in any way with ratifying a treaty that is as dead as the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) has just described it. At the next Council, during their presidency, will the British Government try to persuade other Governments to forget about rule changes of all kinds for the foreseeable future, to live with the treaties of Nice and others, however unsatisfactory, and to get on with the real business of the Union? In particular, will they give priority to economic reform, to completing the single market in services as well as goods, and to trying to get closer to real co-operation on foreign and security affairs after the recent demonstration of how comparatively weak we all are in the world unless we improve the ways in which we collaborate with our partners in all those areas where we really have interests in common?

Mr. Straw: It is the self-evident truth, as I spelled out in the original White Paper on the proposals for the constitutional treaty a year and a half ago, that

> "If a new Treaty cannot be agreed, or ratified, then the EU would still carry on under its current arrangements; and it would have the same functions as it has today."

I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman, as I have with my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), that outcomes are crucial and that that is the test by which the European Union will be judged in every member state.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Although the Prime Minister, in answer to a question from me, said that there would be a vote on the constitution even if other countries defeated it beforehand, may I say that I accept as sensible the position that my right hon. Friend has outlined to the House? However, might I probe him further on the distinction that he made towards the end of his statement and in relation to the Liberal Democrat question—the idea that there is a list of reforms with which everybody agrees and a list of contentious reforms? Would it be possible for him to put a note in the Library of what he believes are the reforms on which we are all agreed and a list of those reforms on which he fears that some of us might take issue with him, so that we can strengthen his position against those who will get this treaty, by hook or by crook, whatever the people of Europe say?

Mr. Straw: I thank my right hon. Friend for that sedulous invitation; I think that it requires a period of reflection. What I would say to him, again, is this: I know and respect the fact that he had a different emphasis from me about this treaty, but I do not recall him ever, for example, objecting to the proposals to strengthen the role of national Parliaments; his objection was that they did not go far enough.

Mr. Field: What about the list?

Mr. Straw: A second example, since I am asked, concerns the voting system, which is palpably in our interests and in the interests of anybody who wants a transparent system of democracy.

Let me just make this clear. As I said to the Opposition spokesman, there may be some perfectly sensible changes that we could introduce by other means, but there will be no proposals made by this Government that seek to bring in this constitutional treaty, or elements of it, by the back door. That is clear.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): May I remind the Foreign Secretary that my party is wholly and unswervingly in favour of the enlargement of the

European Union? Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore encourage the Prime Minister to use this moment of reflection to consider those rules that are not subject to treaty amendment and would enable the Union to function more effectively and more efficiently along the lines proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), at the same time as genuinely seeking a leadership role in the European Union when we assume the chairmanship and ensuring that it puts forward a plan for economic growth and for lower unemployment that will command the support of the greater number of the countries of the European Union?

Mr. Straw: The simple answer is yes, we are doing that. Indeed, on enlargement, as we flagged up in the Queen's Speech, a Bill will come before this House for ratifying the enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania, and we are not proposing to have a referendum in respect of that Bill.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure the Foreign Secretary would agree that among the things that are synonymous with the European Union are back-door and back-room deals. Will he assure me that one matter that he would certainly submit to a referendum is the creation of a Foreign Minister and a European President?

Mr. Straw: Those points are central to the European constitutional treaty, and of course I see no prospect of their being brought into force, save through the vehicle of a constitutional treaty.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary understand that much of continental Europe is now very close to the political, monetary and employment disasters predicted in detail by those of us who spoke and voted against the Maastricht treaty in the House? Why, at a time when hedge fund managers are speculating on whether there is any long-term future for the euro as a currency, does he go on saying that it is in the British interest, and even in the interest of the peoples of western Europe, to allow a continuation of the ever-increasing federal follies that we have seen ever since Maastricht?

Mr. Straw: I did not say anything of the kind. The hon. Gentleman speaks of certain problems relating to the euro. I did not mention the word "euro" at any point in my statement, and the constitutional treaty is not about that. We have always made it clear that should there come a moment when we judge the economic tests to have been satisfied, there will be a referendum on the euro before the United Kingdom joins.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): May I put it to my right hon. Friend that the tactic of using referendums to defer very difficult and important decisions on Europe is the equivalent of kicking the ball into the long grass? May I put it to him that if Blackburn Rovers adopted the same tactic, they would be playing alongside Preston in the football league rather than in the premiership, and would certainly have no chance of qualifying for Europe?

Mr. Straw: I do not quite follow my hon. Friend's point about Lancashire football teams, but I can say this. We have not used referendums very often in this country, but we have used them in respect of constitutional changes. For that reason, we listened carefully to the representations made about a referendum on the constitutional treaty and decided last Easter to recommend such a move to the House. I think that that was sensible, but it does not follow—and I do not think it is the Opposition's policy—that we should have referendums to ratify all EU treaties.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I accept that the European constitution is indeed as dead as the Monty Python parrot. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we need to reform European Union policies that undermine Europe? May we perhaps start with the common agricultural policy, which hurts developing countries, and indeed the common fisheries policy, which damages our coastal communities?

Mr. Straw: I agree with both points, but the British Government have been in the lead in reforming the common agricultural policy, to take one example. We have been able to make the reforms we have made so far only because of qualified majority voting, and because some of the countries that benefit unjustifiably from the CAP have not been able to exercise a veto. So yes, reform of the CAP and the CFP are priorities for this Government.

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The House should welcome my right hon. Friend's statement that he reserves the right to bring the referendum Bill back to the House if circumstances change. Is it not a fact that Europe has been built on the principle of stopping the clock at five minutes to 12 so that negotiations can continue beyond the deadline? Is my right hon. Friend not entirely right to extol the virtues of the treaty that is on the table now, and will be on the table for many a year to come?

In the context of the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), can my right hon. Friend assure the House that during our presidency, beginning on 1 July, we will not be deflected from seeking to enhance and advance the Lisbon agenda entered into in 2000?

Mr. Straw: I take note of what my hon. Friend said in the first part of his question. Yes is the answer to the second part: achieving outcomes and tangible objectives for the British people as well as for Europe's other citizens is central to our presidency.

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): On 13 May, the Prime Minister told the editor of *The Sun* that even if the French voted no, this country would still have a referendum on the new EU constitutional treaty; he said that that was a Government promise. The French and Dutch national interests have been served; even the Spanish national interest has been served. Is it not incumbent on the Prime Minister and other Ministers who stand at the Dispatch Box to serve the British national interest? Should not they now give the British people the same rights as the French, the Dutch and the Spanish?

Mr. Straw: I spelled out the Government's position very clearly in my statement. The simple fact is that there

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is no point in proceeding with the Bill at the moment, because of the uncertainty about the consequences of the clear decisions in France and the Netherlands—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State must be allowed to answer. Does he wish to continue?

Mr. Straw: Anyway, there is no point.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the priority for the European Union must now be to address the underlying concerns of the French and Dutch people, and many others across the European Union, and to come forward with positive, practical ways of dealing with the economic problems in Europe and strengthening Europe's voice internationally to deal with the issues that are important to European citizens? Would not that co-operation be put at risk by the kind of visceral Europhobia that we have heard from those on the Conservative Front Bench?

Mr. Straw: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The British people have not had an opportunity to express an opinion on what was then the Common Market for 30 years. We applaud the fact that France, the Netherlands and even Spain have given expression to their views, but the British Government must understand that the British people may have severe reservations about the institutional architecture of the existing treaties: Maastricht, Nice and Amsterdam. These are the issues on which the British people need to express their views, and that is the justification for our having a referendum. We need to express our view on the position at which Europe has arrived.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the British people have not had a chance to vote on EU treaties for 30 years. It was the arguments that he and many others put forward that led us to the view that we should provide for a referendum on this constitutional treaty, and that is what we proposed in the Bill. He cannot have it both ways, however. The constitutional treaty is designed to amend the existing treaties, but as I understand it, the Conservatives are not proposing a total change in the Maastricht and Nice treaties, the Single European Act or the treaty of Rome. If they are, let them come forward with their proposals.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on making the best of a bad job. As I understand it, he accepts that the treaty is dead, but cannot say so in case he gets the blame. In those circumstances, I accept that there is no need for a referendum at this stage. However, I want to ask him about his little list of issues that he believes would be accepted by all. How does that differ from a "constitution lite", and does it represent an attempt by him to slip through a number of items from the constitution without the promised referendum? Will he also clarify whether he intends, as part of the negotiation process in Europe, to concede the British budget rebate?

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for his compliment, and I take it in the spirit in which it was intended. Let me make it clear that there is no plan, proposal or intention to slip elements of the constitution through by the back door, to pick up my hon. Friend's phrase. I was making the separate and prosaic point that there are some things—to do with strengthening the role of national Parliaments, for example—that could be done separately. I think that even my hon. Friend would find it difficult to argue with those measures, as they are aimed at strengthening the role of national Parliaments, not weakening them.

So far as future financing is concerned, that was discussed two weeks ago by Foreign Ministers, and will be discussed again this coming Sunday and Monday. Our position on future financing and the UK's abatement has been made clear: we believe that the abatement is fully justified, and we will not hesitate to use the veto if necessary.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): May I bring the Foreign Secretary back to the issue of transparency raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell)? In particular, might his list of non-contentious issues include the proposal in article I-24 of the treaty that the Council of Ministers should meet in public when discussing legislative issues? Would he further accept that that reform can be achieved without a treaty change?

Mr. Straw: As far as I recall, those proposals have already been agreed and could come into force at a political level without a need for any treaty change.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): In welcoming the decision by the Foreign Secretary to postpone the referendum, which is only sensible after the outcome of the French and Dutch votes, he will know that in 24 days' time Britain will be in the leadership as far as these issues are concerned. It is worth reminding the House that it is not a question of having or not having a list—Britain's commitment to the reform agenda goes back eight years, and it is set out in part in the letter from Chancellor Schröder and the Prime Minister on how the European Council can be reformed. When we take over the presidency, will the Foreign Secretary ensure that the reform agenda will be pursued and that, if there are sensible statements and policies that can be implemented with the agreement of all concerned, they will be implemented.

Mr. Straw: Yes, I will do so. I made that point in my statement earlier today.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): May I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that we are listening to a Foreign Secretary and a Government in denial? What he must do to live up to his assurances is demand the sacking of Javier Solana, who is a Foreign Minister in all but name, dismantle the European Defence Agency, which was a central provision of the constitution, and

turn back the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice, which is implementing the charter of fundamental rights through European Community law. Otherwise, he is co-operating with our European partners in implementing this constitution by stealth, against the wishes of the French and Dutch people who have voted against it.

Mr. Straw: I am more than grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has asked me, as he has exposed his overwhelming hostility not to the constitutional treaty but to the institution of the European Union itself. He says that we should sack Javier Solana. Javier Solana, the high representative of the European Union, was appointed not under the constitutional treaty but under the treaty of Maastricht, recommended by the Conservative party when it was in power. The Defence Agency, again, is not in the constitutional treaty, but was established under the existing treaty base of Maastricht. All that he has done is expose his unremitting hostility to the EU, which Labour Members, and apparently many Conservative Members, do not share.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary acknowledge that a large number of people voted no in the French referendum because they did not want to see free market, global economics imposed on their country or others in Europe, which would lead to yet higher rates of unemployment and further attacks on the welfare state throughout the continent? Does he accept that if he is to propose any new constitution, it must meet those real, legitimate concerns and promote something called a social Europe rather than a market Europe?

Mr. Straw: I am happy to engage in an ideological debate with my hon. Friend about this matter, but I happen to believe that the way that we achieve a social Europe is by harnessing the forces of the market so that they work in people's interests, not against them. I do not happen to believe, however, that a social Europe and social welfare is antithetical to a market economy—it depends how the two are harnessed in the interests of each. As for the reasons why people in France and the Netherlands voted no, they are many and various. In France, however, what is clear is that many people voted no because they believed that we had won too much in the achievement of the constitutional treaty—a point made persistently by Laurent Fabius, one of the leaders of the no campaign.

Mr. Speaker: Order. We now move on to the main business.

Orders of the Day

Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill

[Relevant documents: The Fifth Report from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Session 2004–05, HC 408—I, on the Government's Rural Strategy and the draft Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, and the Government Response thereto, Cm 6574.]

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. After the statement that we have just had, my point of order may seem rather small beer, but it is right to draw to your attention that item No. 2 on the Order Paper today—the programme motion to the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill—is not debatable. In the first Second Reading debate in this Parliament, the Government have fallen into their bad old ways. Is there any way that we can protect the ability of the House to scrutinise legislation? Not only are debates on legislation curtailed but we may not even debate whether they should be curtailed.

Under item No. 2, the Bill will complete its proceedings within a little over four weeks. One may say that that is just bad luck, but we were elected here not to watch legislation go through like sausages through a machine, but to scrutinise it. After the farce at the end of the previous Parliament, when a huge number of Government Bills were rammed through this place without proper debate, we should not allow the Government to start the new Parliament in that way.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let me answer the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier). The hon. Lady may not wish to raise her point of order after I have done so.

We are about to have a Second Reading debate. The programme motion can be referred to during that debate. While it is not debatable, it can be mentioned and debated during the Second Reading debate.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. The House should be given the right to look again at the question of programming Bills automatically. Has the issue been raised with you by the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House? The Government told us that they would not continue in the same programming manner. We should have the chance at least to debate procedure at the beginning of this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker: We are not going on to a procedural debate. We are going on to a Second Reading debate.

4.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill lays the foundations for a more holistic and, we believe, more effective approach both to the natural environment and to rural communities. I want to say at the outset how grateful I am to all who have engaged in the extensive pre-legislative scrutiny, debate and dialogue that has helped to shape our approach to this legislation. I am grateful not least to Lord Haskins, who undertook much public consultation and dialogue before producing the report on which we have drawn in framing the Bill and to our own former Select Committee.

I thank the Select Committee and our colleagues for undertaking pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill in draft so quickly in the previous Session. That enabled us to secure the Bill as the first Second Reading of this Parliament. Given that, and subject to the will and decision of Parliament, I now hope to secure Royal Assent for the Bill next year. As a result, I can announce that I have brought forward the potential vesting date for the formal establishment of natural England and the commission for rural communities to October 2006, three months ahead of the commitment that I made in "The Rural Strategy 2004".

The context of this legislation is the vision of rural England set out less than a year ago in the Government's rural strategy—a vision of a better quality of life for all, with particular emphasis on improving the quality of life of the most disadvantaged, and a vision that has at its heart the pursuit of sustainable development, so that social, economic and environmental issues are all taken into account in shaping policy.

Economic prosperity underpins the provision of good public services and other social and environmental benefits. Equally, a healthy environment and a just society are essential for economic success and enjoyment of our natural environment can make a huge contribution to people's health and happiness.

The Bill will create simpler, stronger organisational structures and transform the way in which we deliver rural and environmental services. It will establish natural England, a new agency to act as an independent and powerful guardian of our natural heritage that will be responsible for conserving and enhancing England's rich and diverse natural environment for the benefit of this and future generations.

For people in rural areas, the Bill will establish the commission for rural communities—a strong independent rural advocate, adviser and watchdog with a duty to ensure that the Government's policies make a real difference to people in rural areas, especially in tackling the pockets of social disadvantage and economic under-performance whose existence has long been recognised but whose problems have not always been addressed.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): One such area of social disadvantage is the villages in rural communities such as mine that have no connection to the gas network. Believe it or not, I have villages that are only half a mile from the gas network but not yet connected. Will my right hon. Friend look at what might be done to ensure that there is an initiative—supported, probably, by more money from some of the gas companies that made profits during the spike last October—to ensure that some of those rural villages in my constituency are linked to the gas network?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I understand his concern for the welfare of his constituents. I am not 100 per cent. sure that this Bill would do anything in particular to facilitate the cause that he advances, but I am sure that he will find a way to raise the matter in Committee.

The Bill will establish a flexible structure of delivery that is both fit for purpose today and able to evolve to meet challenges ahead. It brings together the strengths of English Nature, the Countryside Agency's landscape access and recreation role and DEFRA's rural development service to establish a new independent and powerful non-departmental public body—natural England—as one integrated agency. In natural England we are, for the first time ever in England, uniting responsibility for biodiversity and landscape—in rural, urban and coastal areas—with promoting access and recreation.

Our natural environment helps to make England what it is, from our beautiful coastlines to our historic dry stone walls and hedgerows. We have stunning landscapes, rivers and lakes, set in Shakespeare's "silver sea", a unique geodiversity and the flora and fauna that rely on this rich variety of habitats and ecosystems. The establishment of natural England will help to ensure that our distinctive landscapes and green spaces are the best they can be and that the habitats and ecosystems supporting our precious biodiversity are conserved and enhanced.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's colourful description of the countryside, but 97 per cent. of the nation's wild flower meadows have been lost in the last 60 years. What measures in the Bill will ensure that that is addressed?

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that one does not put absolutely everything in the structure of legislation, but the establishment of natural England should help to bring together many of the different concerns that are expressed and give a greater focus. If, as I hope, the House carries the Bill, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will find ways of drawing this matter to the attention of the new agency, although I doubt that he will need to do so, as it is exactly the kind of thing that will be among its major concerns.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): My right hon. Friend's glowing description of England's green and pleasant land could have been a description of High Peak, which, as the House will recognise, is the most beautiful constituency in England. As High Peak is mostly within the Peak District national park, will she assure me that the proposals in the Bill will enhance not only the way in which the national parks protect the environment, but the support that the national parks can give to the communities that live in them?

Margaret Beckett: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend on his first point: the Bill will do nothing to hinder—and, hopefully, much to assist—national parks. I share his admiration for the national park that he mentioned, which is also close to my constituency. The Bill will provide a means to express concerns about the interests of constituents and ensure that they are taken into account.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (Con): The right hon. Lady did herself less than justice in replying to the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) because one of the strengths of the Bill is the fact that it contains measures to deal with non-native, invasive species, which have a big impact on biodiversity. Can she give an absolute assurance—many people are concerned—that, when the changes are made, the independence and scientific integrity of English Nature, which is so greatly valued and has played such an important part in preserving this green and pleasant land, will in no way be compromised?

Margaret Beckett: I can give the hon. Gentleman that absolute assurance. I am grateful to him for his intervention and he will know that the issue was raised from the very beginning of our discussions. It was clear from the outset that there was great concern about preserving the reputation, strength and experience that English Nature brings to bear on so many issues. Part of the debate, both then and since, focused on the notion that the replacement body might be worse than English Nature, but I recall that exactly the same point was raised when English Nature was itself established and replaced its predecessor body. I give him the absolute assurance that it is no part of the Government's intention to weaken in any way the independence and scientific integrity that English Nature has brought to bear on its work.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): I should like to take the Secretary of State back briefly to the Peak District national park. Much concern has been expressed about clause 57, which deals with the make-up of our national parks. It has been suggested that there might be a change in the representation of the parish in respect of the Peak District park. The Secretary of State knows that that park is unique in having so many local authorities making up its contributory members, so will she give an assurance that clause 57 will not be used to reduce local representation in respect of that and other national parks?

Margaret Beckett: I certainly undertake to reflect on the hon. Gentleman's point. We will look with great care into the issue. I fully understand his point and I am conscious of the great contribution that many local people have made to the Peak District and other national parks.

The new agency that the Bill seeks to set up will not be an arid, inward-looking body. Natural England will promote access and open-air recreation to help people to reconnect with our natural environment, to enjoy it, respect it and understand it and to make the health and well-being benefits of our environment available to all. The agency will work with partners at the national, regional and local level, reducing bureaucracy and duplication by providing a single source for its services rather than the present three sources, and it will also bring savings for the taxpayer.

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned that one function is to promote access. Another is to promote biodiversity and conservation. Those two functions can sometimes be in conflict, particularly in respect of off-roaders, motor cycles and so forth. What guidance will she issue or what other steps will she take to ensure that the interests of conservation and biodiversity are not damaged by the access arrangements?

Margaret Beckett: If it were seriously suggested that guidance was needed, we would certainly look carefully into it and I am sure that we will be able to debate the issue in greater detail in Committee. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, to which I would like to respond. Concerns were expressed from the outset that the function of protecting biodiversity must not be diminished. Those closely involved in the preparation for establishing the agency—not least the present chairman of English Nature, who has been good enough to act as chair of the joint group of chairs of the constituent bodies—have taken the view that there is merit in bringing together the access and biodiversity functions and that there is something to be said for having one body to decide on the difficult choices and balances that have to be made. I understand the concern. The argument about the best way to handle the matter is legitimate, but I assure the hon. Gentleman both that the Government have taken the issues on board and that there is great recognition of the sensitivities that he described.

The Bill will also establish the commission for rural communities. As we said only a few weeks ago in our rural manifesto, this Government have undertaken unprecedented investment in rural schools, transport, health care and policing, and to support small local businesses, particularly rural post offices. However, I am clear that a particular focus of the commission's work, as we develop our public services in rural areas, should be on analysing and advising on tackling rural disadvantage. Some rural areas are indeed relatively prosperous, but there are some considerable disparities in wealth between, and even within, different rural areas, with pockets of deprivation hidden among otherwise thriving areas. It is only right that scarce public resources are as far as possible targeted towards those people, businesses and communities that need them most. The Bill emphasises that focus.

Some who responded to the draft Bill in February were concerned that that emphasis could in some way skew the commission's work away from the needs of rural England as a whole. That is not the Government's intention. The commission's remit clearly covers all rural areas and issues, but it will have a particular regard to rural disadvantage and economic underperformance. That approach is rooted in the Government's and the Labour party's core values and we think that it strikes the right balance.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the great successes of the Countryside Agency has been the development of the

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rural-proofing of Government policies to ensure that they are fit for purpose in rural areas or otherwise differentiated to meet the special circumstances there? Will she give an assurance that, under the commission, that success in rural-proofing will continue?

Margaret Beckett: I certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance, and I am coming to that point in a moment.

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): As the Secretary of State is to deal with that point will she also take on board pieces of legislation, such as the Government's recent licensing laws, that have had the most adverse effect on the ability to hold functions in village halls? Does rural-proofing extend across all Departments? If so, what changes will she make to ensure that it works in future?

Margaret Beckett: I have heard the concerns that the hon. Lady has expressed. It was my impression that much of the anxiety was ill conceived. I speak from memory, but I do not think that the legislation is yet in force, so it is hard to see how it can have had a disadvantageous effect. Of course, I take her point seriously and I assure her, as I assured my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), that as it is absolutely the Government's intention that the new commission should maintain that watchdog role on behalf of rural communities, while we will try to ensure that there are not the disadvantageous effects that she described. If there are, I am sure that the commission will say so, and forthrightly.

The Government have already been pressing ahead with a radical transformation of rural funding to streamline the more than 100 schemes that Lord Haskins identified into just three core funds. Each Government office in the regions is brokering a draft regional rural delivery framework that will seek to set out regional priorities and partnership arrangements.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): The Secretary of State outlined in her opening remarks the tightness of the timetable that she wishes to follow, subject to the House's approval of this Bill but, in her reply to the Select Committee's report on the simplification of rural funding schemes, she says:

"At this stage it is still too early to provide a detailed delivery design of the future arrangements which will result from this major programme of change."

Will she give a more accurate timetable of when these matters are to be resolved and whether there will be any consultation on the final plan?

Margaret Beckett: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that information at the moment. If we have it available to us, I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), will include it in his winding-up remarks. Otherwise I undertake to write to the right hon. Gentleman, who might have another role in these matters in the not-too-distant future.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): On the priorities for the rural aspects of the Bill and the partnerships that my right hon. Friend will look to build, what priority will be given to biodiversity and nature conservation in urban areas, especially those with sites of special scientific interest and local nature reserves? The Bill rightly places great emphasis on rural communities, but we should ensure that we do not lose sight of what is important in urban areas.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend is right and I take her point entirely. It is because the Bill makes different arrangements for rural areas, as well as setting up natural England, that it places great emphasis on those areas, and no doubt our debates will also concentrate on them. However, I can give her the absolute assurance that it is the Government's intention that the new agency, natural England, should have clear responsibilities for biodiversity across the country, in rural, urban and coastal areas. That is well understood by those who will be part of the natural England agency, should the Bill become law.

The role of the commission for rural communities in monitoring independently how well Government policies are delivering the right outcomes—which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford rightly called rural-proofing—is crucial. That is why we have included in the Bill a new provision requiring the commission to report publicly on the outcome of that monitoring and rural-proofing. That should ensure maximum transparency in its activities and underline its credibility as an independent watchdog.

As a consequence of setting up natural England and the commission for rural communities, the Bill will reconstitute the Joint Nature Conservation Committee as a UK-wide organisation, formally extending its remit to Northern Ireland.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): Before the Secretary of State leaves the commission for rural communities, I was delighted to see that, in clause 20, the Bill provides for research. How will it be funded and how will it link with the research councils and the Government's research policy?

Margaret Beckett: We principally envisage that the commission will be able to draw on work by the research councils. Within its budget, it may have scope to do some analysis, examination and research of its own. The Department has funded research and will continue to find ways to do so, not least to provide evidence of, and a database on, what is happening in rural communities. The lack of such a database was a severe handicap in trying to implement the rural White Paper.

Tom Levitt: The commission will presumably look for partners in seeking to pursue its agenda. Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge the potential of the voluntary sector in assisting to deliver those policy objectives and can she assure me that, wherever there are appropriate and willing partners in the voluntary sector, that will be encouraged? Will she also acknowledge that the voluntary sector in rural areas suffers from issues of economy of scale, like other organisations that work in those areas, and that that issue would have to be addressed in any such partnerships?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes another important point. It is very much the Government's hope and intention that it will be possible to involve the

voluntary sector and we may be able to explore that point in Committee. One reason for seeking to provide flexibility in the Bill for setting up such partnerships is to reflect the diversity and variety of potential partners, whether they be voluntary or other organisations, and to ensure that people can work in ways that best suit the tasks that they seek to perform. The means will vary from one area to another and we hope to allow for precisely that.

I mentioned the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. The Bill will strengthen the breadth of scientific expertise on the committee by increasing the number of independent members from three to five. The Bill will also introduce measures to strengthen wildlife and habitat protection and to mainstream biodiversity considerations into public policy and decision making, because it provides that every public authority must have regard to the purpose of conserving biological diversity in the exercise of its functions. That duty should help to ensure that biodiversity becomes a natural part of policy making.

The Bill will introduce a package of amendments to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 aimed at improving protection for native animal and plant species and a new provision on the possession of pesticides, designed to help prevent their abuse to kill wild birds and other wild animals. Those measures, too, have been the subject of wide consultation.

The Bill will introduce new enforcement provisions to help ensure compliance with wildlife protection legislation to help redress some of the current imbalance of interests in wildlife enforcement. It also creates two new offences to assist in managing and protecting our sites of special scientific interest. One will enforce an existing duty on public authorities and the other, we hope, will help further to deter intentional or reckless damage.

The broads, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty are recognised as both our finest landscapes and as leaders in sustainable land management. The Bill contains a number of provisions that stem from the review of English national park authorities that was published in July 2002 and the subsequent review of the Broads Authority to ensure that the statutory framework is sufficiently clear to enable them to operate efficiently and flexibly.

The Bill places some important limits on establishing rights of way for mechanically propelled vehicles by limiting vehicular rights that can be recorded on local authorities' definitive maps and statements of public rights of way in England and Wales. The hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) raised that issue and I understand that there are strong views on both sides of the argument. We have taken into account more than 14,000 responses to our 2003 consultation document and believe that the provisions in the Bill strike the right balance between the needs of all users of the countryside and the protection of our landscape and wildlife.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Margaret Beckett: This will be the very last time.

Paddy Tipping: The Secretary of State rightly stressed the importance of legislation on rights of way and vehicles. My understanding is that part 6 will not come in until a commencement order has been made. Can she give us an indication—if not now, in the wind-up—of what date she has in mind?

Margaret Beckett: I am not sure that we can, but if we can, we will. I understand that the issue gives rise to strong feelings.

The Bill reconstitutes the Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council as an independent body supported by both DEFRA and the Scottish Executive in Scotland. It separates the council from British Waterways and gives it new, wider terms of reference so that it can advise the Government, navigation authorities and other interested persons about all waterway uses.

Part 8 contains a range of measures that aim both to modernise delivery at present and to secure organisational flexibilities for the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Tom Levitt) raised the issue of voluntary bodies. Chapter 1 enables Ministers to delegate specific functions to delivery bodies and introduces a parallel provision to allow them flexibility to enter agreements. That is intended to ensure that policies and services can be delivered by whoever is best placed to do so—that may be a voluntary organisation—and as close to the customer as possible. It will also allow us to adapt delivery arrangements to respond rapidly to new challenges in the future. However, in response to concerns raised by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee during pre-legislative scrutiny, we have included a new provision to restrict the types of function that can be delegated to other bodies, so that inspection and enforcement functions cannot be delegated to private bodies.

Chapter 2 gives Ministers the power to establish new boards for the purpose of helping to develop and promote agricultural and related industries, or to abolish certain existing levy bodies. That will enable Ministers to implement the findings of the current review of levy boards, which enjoys strong industry support, without further delay. We will consult widely on the findings of that review and take all industry viewpoints into account, before deciding exactly how to implement them.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Margaret Beckett: I apologise to my hon. Friend but I am almost at the end of my speech.

As the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) had some fun during a previous debate by reading out a list of the many bodies that relate to our Department, I feel confident that he will be happy to support the provisions in the Bill that may reduce their number.

Finally, the Bill allows land drainage bodies to take the environmental effects of drainage works into account. Currently, they do not integrate such considerations in the decision-making process.

Our rural strategy, together with the rural manifesto, sets out a vision of thriving rural communities, tackling rural social exclusion wherever it occurs and developing and maintaining a rich, diverse natural environment.

[Margaret Beckett]

The Bill contains an ambitious, but, I hope, not too controversial, programme of change and reform that should bring real and practical benefits for this and future generations. It should radically transform our ability to deliver rural and environmental services at present, and to respond quickly to the challenges of the future. It should mean that rural people will have a stronger voice and rural businesses will find it easier to access support. Our natural environment, in all parts of England, will be better conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of all—now and in future generations.

The Bill has been warmly welcomed by the organisations that will be most affected by it and I am happy to commend it to the House.

4.55 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill because, whilst making welcome amendments to wildlife protection and rights of way legislation, it nevertheless creates a new public body with far-reaching powers affecting the landscape of England and Wales and rural communities without setting the protection of the natural environment as the priority, without creating a simplified scheme of support for either the environment or rural communities and without any accountability at local or national level; and because it also creates a second public body with no function that cannot be effectively delivered by existing local authorities and by other elected bodies and gives the Secretary of State powers to abolish existing public bodies and to create new public bodies, endowing them with significant powers."

Let me begin with the good news: we can welcome many parts of the Bill. First, the provisions in part 6 that relate to byways open to all traffic are welcome. However, by contrast to the plea from Labour Back Benchers, we would like to tease out a concern in Committee about the fact that the forthcoming announcement of those measures has stimulated a large number of applications by those who are concerned with increasing access for off-roaders and trail bikes. That issue stretches from my constituency to that of my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin).

In fact, a rudimentary check by my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), who is the shadow Minister, suggests that more than 200 such applications are in process around the country, and extrapolating from my local knowledge, I expect that there may be many more in the pipeline between now and the commencement date. I doubt whether it is the Government's intention—certainly, we would not wish it to be the case—that those applications should have a smooth passage simply because people have been stirred into action by the Bill. I hope that we can find some means to resolve that with the Minister in Committee.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): During the general election campaign, a trail rider in my constituency brought my attention to an article in one of the trail riding magazines—I understand that it has a circulation of about 100,000—that advised its readers to vote Conservative if trail bikers wished to stop this onslaught against their sport. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman could advise the House whether the editor of that magazine was wrong in his assessment that voting Conservative would be a vote for trail riders' rights to be expanded across the countryside.

Mr. Letwin: I am afraid that the editor of that magazine was wrong if that was his view. For a long while, we have taken the view that such controls are needed. Of course, the essential issue is that there is no reason why the existence of a horse-drawn carriage in 1600 on a track that is now virtually unusable should establish a right for those in four-wheel-drive vehicles today if such a right would be grossly environmentally insensitive. There is consensus on that, probably between all parties in the House, and the question is whether the precise drafting of the Bill captures that well enough to deal with the interim situation that has been created by the announcement.

Mr. McLoughlin: Not only is there consensus, but I said in my election address that something needed to be done about the issue. The national parks have been mentioned, but the issue needs to be addressed, particularly in areas such as Foolow, Eyam and Teddington, which have had tremendous problems over the past few months, given the growth in the notoriety of those sites. There is great concern that the problem will be compounded because the Secretary of State has given such a long lead-in period, and I hope that it is one of the things that is considered carefully in Committee.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. That is exactly the point that I am making. I hope that we can achieve some sort of rubric that at least allows local authorities to consider in the interim the environmental effects of a BOAT—byways open to all traffic—application. Of course, the law is structured in such a way that such things cannot be considered. There is an immediate transition from the legal fact of the previous use as a carriageway into permission—something on which I hope we can reach agreement on the need for change.

The second part of the Bill that we can welcome is part 3. It deals with biodiversity and wildlife and several of my hon. Friends and Labour Members have already mentioned that. It is clear that the duty on public authorities to conserve biodiversity, which appears in clause 40, is a good one. However, we will want in Committee to consider the effect on local authorities of the lists that the Secretary of State is empowered by the Bill to draw up so as to ensure that local authorities do not find themselves with an undue and unbearable duty to implement lists of actions prepared by her.

Clause 43 has been mentioned in questions to the Secretary of State, and we recognise that the offence of using pesticide to poison wildlife should exist. However, we will want in Committee to consider carefully the test of intent. The case I have in mind is that of a farmer who has a perfectly legitimate and lawful pesticide and who maintains that he or she is about to use it in order to do proper things with pesticides on the farm, but where the authority believes that there is an intent to use it for another purpose. What will be the test in such a case? We clearly need to ensure that, in our correct and

consensual ardour to prevent effects on biodiversity, we do not end up with an assault on civil rights and civil liberties.

Clauses 46 to 50 contain the protections for wildlife, including those against invasive non-native species that were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth). I am delighted to see those provisions. As he pointed out, they are a valuable part of the Bill but, again, we will want to look at the details in Committee.

Finally in this category, I want to mention part 4 and the protections for sites of special scientific interest. Again, we welcome the offence of recklessly and/or intentionally destroying SSSIs and the idea of court restoration orders. However, we have doubts about the provision for a penalty to be placed on public authorities. To have a criminal offence for a public authority may not be unprecedented—it may apply in the case of the manager of a nuclear power station in certain circumstances—but it is very unusual. We will want in Committee to consider exactly how the provision will work and whether it can be sustained in its present form.

Beyond those parts of the Bill that we welcome, there are at least three parts that we do not think are particularly controversial. The first relates to the joint nature conservation committee covered in part 2, but we will want to consider its scope in Committee. Part 5 refers to the national parks and the broads and, when we consider them in Committee, we shall certainly want to take on board the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire. Part 7 on inland waterways also looks relatively uncontentious.

Chapters 2 and 3 of part 8 are contentious in point of process rather than substance. Ironically and perhaps suitably, chapter 2 is essentially a Henry VIII clause—in fact, it contains a whole succession of such clauses. We have no concern about the general idea of the Government continuing their current review to its conclusion and restructuring the levy boards. There is wide agreement in the industry on the need for restructuring, but we have concerns about the use of such a wide power to change primary legislation. We recognise that there is an affirmative order provision in the Bill, but we will want in Committee to look very carefully at whether it is sufficiently constrained and whether, in practice rather than in form, the House will have an opportunity to debate sufficiently what emerges. Perhaps we shall receive ministerial undertakings in Committee that will satisfy us and help to ensure that the provision is properly scrutinised.

In the same vein, clause 89 in chapter 3 of part 8 deals with financial powers, and we will want to look carefully at the scope of those powers. As I read the Bill—I may have missed a subtle point of drafting—it gives the Secretary of State powers that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has not yet fully understood. Someone in the Treasury might not have been as eagle eyed as they might have been, because I think that the Secretary of State would be able to do something that this Secretary of State would not wish to do—subsidise any number of nuclear power stations. However, the Secretary of State would also be able to do something that this Secretary of State might wish to do—subsidise any number of people complaining about nuclear power stations. In fact, the Secretary of State could do both, the powers are so widely drawn. Broadly, anything that the Secretary of State takes into her head to do—which could be described as anything to do with the environment, which is really almost anything when one comes to think of it—she could pay for, subject to the Treasury providing her with some funds. We shall want to examine the clause carefully to ensure that it is not over-widely drawn.

Having said that there are parts of the Bill that we welcome—parts of it that are uncontroversial and other parts that are questionable only in terms of process—I fear that we have big problems with one part. That is why we have tabled a reasoned amendment. I refer to part 1, which is the largest and most important part. I shall deal first with chapter 2, which establishes clearly, as the Secretary of State said, a commission for rural communities. It is pretty clear in the Bill, in policy statements and in previous ministerial statements what the commission is meant to do. There is no complaint about that. Clause 18 provides that

> "The Commission's general purpose is to promote . . . awareness among relevant persons and the public of rural needs"

and to promote meeting rural needs. It defines relevant persons as a "public authority". It provides that the commission

> "must take such steps as appear to it to be appropriate for . . . representing rural needs to relevant persons",

namely, to public authorities.

So far, so good, it might be said, except when we come to clause 25, which makes it clear in subsection (1) that the

> "Secretary of State may give the Commission general or specific directions as to the exercise of its functions."

As if that were not sufficient, subsection (4) states:

> "The Commission must comply with any directions given under this section."

Either the commission is an independent rural advocate or it is not. If it is not an independent rural advocate, what is it for? If it can be given directions by the Secretary of State without limit, and if it must comply with those directions without qualification, it is not an independent rural advocate. Indeed, the Secretary of State might just as well appoint one of her officials, one of her Ministers or herself as the independent rural advocate. It is an advocate that will have to do exactly whatever the Secretary of State tells it to do. What is the point of spending public money on having an independent rural advocate that is not remotely independent?

Norman Baker: I am interested in the philosophical direction that the right hon. Gentleman is taking. I hope that he will concede that Government quangos are subject to considerable pressure, often from behind the scenes, from Government Departments that wish them to follow a particular line. They then produce a policy that appears to be independent, but is actually one that is advocated by the relevant Department. At least in clause 25 that is out in the open. We will know what the Government are arguing and we know what the response will be. Are there not some advantages to that approach?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is ingenious.I suspect that our approach might recommend itself to him, given his party's predilection for local

[Mr. Letwin]

independence, autonomy, delegation and subsidiarity. Our view is that there is no need for such a quango; that it is difficult for such a quango, in practice, to represent anybody much; that it will not be independent in a full sense anyway, because it is funded in just the way in which the hon. Gentleman has described and open to the degree of pressure that we all know exists; and that it is even less worth having if it is subject to explicit direction, which I agree is honest but extremely powerful. It would be far better to rely on local authorities, Members of Parliament, Select Committees and so on to represent genuinely the interests of the countryside. We would then avoid the need for yet another quango. That is our position on part 1, chapter 2.

The main issue is with part 1, chapter 1.

Mr. Drew: I think that the hon. Gentleman has fallen into an old trap, which some of us feel is a great danger, and that is to imply that rural Britain is one homogeneous entity. Instead, it is a very varied landscape, both natural and human. For the first time, through the CRC, we could ask the Government actively to involve themselves where communities ask for help and need that help. Is not that level of involvement an advantage?

Mr. Letwin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman in his premise, but his conclusion is entirely a non sequitur. He is right that rural Britain, like urban Britain and suburban Britain, is hugely diverse. It is impossible to imagine the man from Whitehall having the slightest sense of all the variations that provide protection. That is the very reason why powerful and eloquent advocates for particular parts of the country who know those areas—people such as the hon. Gentleman—are employed by the taxpayer in this place to make representations: not to some intermediate body without power, which the CRC will be, nor to any other intermediate body, but direct to the fountainhead, the Secretary of State, sitting not 20 ft from the hon. Gentleman. That is a marvellous example of what can happen by way of genuine representation. Likewise, local authorities representing the many hundreds of parts of our kingdom, right down to parish councils, exist precisely to represent people living in a particular place at a particular time, to understand their concerns, and to raise them with the mandate that democratic legitimacy gives to those bodies. That is a better way to represent rural and other interests than creating a quango in Whitehall that is, in effect, under the close direction and supervision of the Secretary of State.

Part 1, chapter 1 deals with natural England—the critical element of the Bill. The same observation as I made about the CRC has to be made about natural England. The Secretary of State said today that natural England would be independent. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), observed in its recommendations on the new body that

"in order for it to be successful, it is important that it has a strong independent voice . . . The independence of the new Agency must be clearly enshrined in its establishing legislation."

At the same time as they produced the Bill, the Government published their response to the Select Committee's report, in which they stated, "The Government agrees." Just in case that could be taken to be a slip of the draftsman's pen, the Government say in paragraph 5a of their policy statement on the Bill that they will give "a strong independent status" to the commission and, in paragraph 5b, that natural England will be "independent of government". Alas, it is not the policy statements of Ministers, however well intentioned, or Ministers' responses to Select Committees that determines whether a body is independent: it is the law that does so.

Clause 16(1) states clearly—the Liberal Democrats will tell that it is another example of admirable legislative transparency—that the Secretary of State will have the power

"to give Natural England general or specific directions",

and subsection (5) states:

"Natural England must comply with any directions"—

[Interruption.] The Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), says that the directions will have to be published. That is splendid. We are all in favour of publication, because we want to know the extent to which the body will be under Ministers' control. However, publication will not make natural England independent.

In a previous post, I frequently argued about the independence of the judiciary with the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett). The House would not be impressed if it were told that the independence of the judiciary consisted of the ability of the Home Secretary of the day to give directions to the judiciary about which persons were to be acquitted or convicted, what sentences were to be handed down, and so on. People are independent of Government when they are not subject to direction; they are not independent of Government when they are subject to direction. Natural England will not be independent; it will be an arm of DEFRA.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that people living in places such as the Norfolk broads want a body that is truly independent? They do not want scope for extra bureaucracy and Government meddling in the countryside. Does he also agree that the Government's track record on bringing various bodies together into one organisation is not a sound one? Only the other day, the Prime Minister said of the Financial Services Authority that it is now destroying wealth and damaging business.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is right. He will recall from the recent months in which he and I worked together in the shadow economics team that we made the very comments that the Prime Minister has now made about the FSA, only to be met with shrieks of horror from the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. I am delighted to see that the Prime Minister now recognises the problems with the FSA.

However, I fear that the position with natural England is even worse than my hon. Friend imagines. Not only is it not independent, not only is it a composite of many things, and not only do we have some fears because of the track record, but it is a body with an astonishingly wide and conflicting set of remits. Let me go through what the Bill establishes as the roles of natural England. Ministers will

recognise the description from the text of the Bill. In clauses 2 and 4, natural England is to be an adviser; in clause 3 a research body; in clause 6 a grant giver; in clause 7 a manager of land, indirectly, through contract; in clause 8 an experimenter; in clause 9 a provider of information; in clause 10 a consultant; in clause 11 a consultant even for commercial purposes; and in clause 12 a policeman and a prosecutor. That provides scope for immense confusion, rather than clarity.

Tom Levitt: Can the right hon. Gentleman point to ways in which English Nature, the Countryside Agency and others are in conflict now? Why does he assume that we are standing at the top of a slippery slope, down which we will inevitably go towards the anarchy and chaos that he describes? I do not recognise that at all. If we are to have a strong and independent guardian of rural areas, which the new agency is intended to be, the Government must give direction to ensure that it remains a strong and independent guardian of rural areas. My final thought, while I am on my feet, is that surely the right hon. Gentleman, in the spirit—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. Interventions are meant to be brief, although I have given some liberty.

Mr. Letwin: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In a way, I am sorry that you did not allow the hon. Member for High Peak (Tom Levitt) to continue. I suspect that he was about to fall into yet another difficulty. If he waits approximately a minute and a half, I shall give him a blissful example of the sort of confusion and disharmony that the Bill will generate, from the mouth of somebody whose evidence he will find it difficult to resist.

The Bill offers clarity about nothing and a lack of clarity and delineation of roles with respect to DEFRA, the Environment Agency, the commission for rural communities, the regional development agencies, local authorities, other environmental bodies and natural England. Let me give the example that the hon. Gentleman seeks. It concerns the relationship between natural England and the Environment Agency. There is a theoretical way in which one can express this, before I come to the quotations that I promised the hon. Gentleman. One can ask whether the Sandford principle—the principle of putting the environment first—really applies to natural England. The answer on page 16 of the Government's response to the Select Committee is very interesting. There the Minister states that

"where the level of importance of biodiversity and landscape has been predetermined, the Sandford principle should . . . apply".

I do not know what that means. I do not suppose that anyone listening to it was intended to know what it meant, but it leaves us with a clear question: does the Sandford principle apply to natural England? If it does, how will it avoid overlap with the Environment Agency? If it does not, how will it avoid conflict with the Environment Agency, unless of course the answer is that, through ministerial directive, DEFRA will constantly be holding the ring? In that case, what is the point of the bodies?

That is not just my view; it is brought out beautifully in one of the classic expositions of what goes wrong in government, despite good intentions, by no one other than Baroness Young, the chief executive of the Environment Agency, who was asked in the Select Committee a series of questions about the relationship between the two bodies. I shall read at some length the observations of Baroness Young, which deserve to be taken seriously. She said:

"I think there is a potential for confusion. For example, if we"—

that is, the Environment Agency—

"are all to do with air, land and water, the primary role of the Environment Agency is the protection of air, land and water, and the new land management agency, the Integrated Agency, will have a clear role in air, land and water, but it must not be its primary role, its primary role is bio-diversity, landscape, access, recreation. Our primary role is air, land and water. We will work very closely together because without clean air, land or water they cannot have decent bio-diversity, access, landscape and recreation. We, likewise, have got a responsibility for things that the Integrated Agency delivers, in that we have to give them the building blocks of clean air, land and water. I hope that has not confused you completely."

Illuminatingly, she continued:

"I think there is a clarity and it is there to be got, but it needs to be written down very carefully otherwise we could tread on each other's corns."

That relationship will be very rich. If one has ever heard a senior bureaucrat—if I can describe Baroness Young in that way—identifying a problem of overlap and confusion, that is it. Her exposition of the problem is beautiful.

Tom Levitt: I repeat—briefly, so that I can make a second point, Madam Deputy Speaker—that such confusion is not inevitable. The problem does not arise under the present system, so why on earth should it happen when English Nature and the Countryside Agency are integrated?

When the right hon. Gentleman was shadow Treasury spokesperson, he was wedded to the James report and the James principle. Would not the James commission applaud the proposal to bring those bodies together?

Mr. Letwin: I am about to address the hon. Gentleman's second point, which he will have cause to regret making, too.

On the hon. Gentleman's first point, almost everyone involved in the countryside today will tell him that confusion and conflicts have arisen and that various bodies and people, including local authorities and farmers, have been affected. That is not only my view, but the Government's view, which is why the Government say that they will bring those bodies together. The problem is that they will be left with a different set of confusions between natural England, the Environment Agency and, while we are at it, regional development agencies and local authorities.

Norman Baker: I listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman's recitation of Baroness Young's comments. Will he square those comments with the Environment Agency briefing that has been sent to all hon. Members? It states:

"We welcome the fact that the purposes proposed in clause 2 for Natural England remain distinctive and complimentary to our own functions . . . Natural England's general purposes as set out in the bill are distinct from our own."

It seems that the concern may have dissipated.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman has produced the most marvellous example of the effect of the power of direction. The Secretary of State does not need to direct the Environment Agency. When the chief executive of the Environment Agency gives evidence to the Select Committee, she says what she thinks. When the Environment Agency writes something down and sends it to MPs, however, it is conscious of the power of direction, which is the problem that we are currently addressing.

Mr. Jack: Perhaps my right hon. Friend's assiduous reading of the Select Committee evidence did not include the supplementary memorandum submitted by the centre for rural economy at the university of Newcastle, which points out that the Environment Agency was not originally included in Lord Haskins's first examination of rural delivery.

Mr. Letwin: Because my right hon. Friend and I have discussed these matters—he sent me to the Library to read the reports—I have come across that contribution. I was about to mention that a problem has arisen from the failure to do what the James review made clear needed to be done, which relates to the intervention by the hon. Member for High Peak.

The original intention was seriously to examine all the bodies involved and to try to come up with a simpler, less confusing architecture. I attribute that motive to the Secretary of State and her then Ministers, who, interestingly, had in mind an image that was shared between the providers of evidence to the Select Committee, the James review and, while we are it, Lord Haskins, who wrote an admirable report that I studied about a year ago.

DEFRA is involved in delivery—so are the Rural Payments Agency, natural England, RDAs and local authorities. Natural England and the Environment Agency are involved as policemen and prosecutors, as are some other bodies—the inspectorates. Natural England, the Environment Agency and the commission for rural communities are all engaged in advocacy, but under direction. Who is doing what? At the end of all this, no ordinary person could possibly really know.

I fear that this pea soup is reflected in the costings, which are instructive. In the regulatory impact assessment, we find under the notes on clauses—as, indeed, we find in the Government's response to the Select Committee—the Government admit that this simplification measure has very considerable one-off costs, which they assess, if I have understood it correctly, at between £32 million and £45 million over the period 2004–05 to 2008–09. That is in paragraph 11 of the RIA. Yet the annual savings are to be only £11.3 million by 2007–08 and are forecast to reach only £21 million by 2009–10. It does not take long to calculate on the back of an envelope that, during the lifetime of this Parliament, the total effect of these measures will be to save roughly zero. That assumes, moreover, that the one-off costs are not greater than anticipated, which would be a unique occurrence in Government. That is not a partisan point—as far as I am aware, nobody in any Administration has ever managed to reorganise a Department with savings as great, or costs as little, as they hoped.

We have before us a marvellous example of Sir Humphrey at work. There are Ministers and advisers with good aims—to simplify, to reduce excessive staffing, to clarify roles, and to give more independence in delivery and advocacy. And what has Sir Humphrey achieved? It is a system that complicates, saves little or nothing, confuses roles further and has one salient effect, which Sir Humphrey will celebrate—the extension of the powers of the Department. I do not doubt the good intentions, but I cannot possibly ask my hon. Friends to sponsor those results; that is why we tabled our reasoned amendment.

5.27 pm

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): It is interesting to reflect that we have just come through a general election campaign in which the criticism was made, especially by environmental non-governmental organisations, that green issues had been given little priority. I welcome the fact that the first Bill to be given its Second Reading in this new Parliament is one that is precisely about environmental issues. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has worked assiduously to ensure that this Bill gets an early Second Reading, and I compliment her, her team, and many of the officials in her Department, who worked extremely hard to bring this proposal forward.

The proposals have been widely welcomed. The right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) was positive about many aspects of the Bill, although he was critical of others; perhaps I will echo some of those views later. He was destructive about the two new agencies—the commission for rural communities and natural England. I would modestly remind him that the powers of those two bodies are already possessed by English Nature and the Countryside Agency. As my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Tom Levitt) said, it has been entirely possible over recent years to deal with the dilemmas and conflicts that arise. The notion behind the Bill—that of DEFRA as an advocate and policy-maker with delivery bodies underneath it—is correct. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that one cannot entirely distinguish between policy and service delivery, as the two are linked and need to work together.

Only a few months ago, the Opposition opposed the Second Reading of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, and lived to regret that decision. I hope that in Committee we can consider many of the right hon. Gentleman's points, and improve the Bill. The Bill has already been improved—it has been subject to widespread consultation and scrutiny—but I believe that it can be improved even further.

I want to reflect on the right hon. Gentleman's manifesto, issued at the very recent general election. It said:

> "We instinctively understand the importance of conservation, natural beauty and our duty of stewardship of the earth."

That is a profound statement, but the right hon. Gentleman's contribution today, in relation to the two new agencies, was profoundly destructive. He gave no prescription for the way forward, and no indication of the kind of institutions that he would like to preserve and enhance our environment. I look forward to the winding-up speeches, when the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) may do that. I also

look forward to the Committee stage, because I think it important for those who propose reasoned amendments also to make reasoned suggestions for a better way forward.

I was always interested in the comments that the right hon. Gentleman made as shadow Chancellor. I hope that he will do as much for rural communities as he did for his party's well being in the economy, and I believe that in time he will regret his destructive attitude.

The Bill has been criticised for concentrating on institutional arrangements rather than having a vision of the countryside. We should bear in mind that it springs from a range of other measures, such as the rural strategy, the research on the future of food and farming that was referred to earlier, the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy—a Government achievement that has not received the recognition it deserves—and the work of Lord Haskins. The creation of DEFRA, a body just four years old, also requires thought about the structures we need in order to deliver in the countryside.

I am interested in natural England, which I think will be an important and powerful body in the countryside. It will face tensions and potential conflict. Clause 2, which deals with general purpose, sets out what natural England will do. It lists five policies that it needs to deliver. The right hon. Gentleman was right to point out that tension and confusion exist, but he should also recognise the importance of setting clause 2 against the guidance given by the Secretary of State.

I see conflicts between some of the proposals for natural England. There are, for instance, the notions of maintaining and enhancing biodiversity and of promoting access and recreation. Some have argued—the right hon. Gentleman mentioned this—that the Sandford principle must be paramount. I feel that we should reflect on that. We have a countryside that needs to live and work and change. The countryside has always lived and worked and changed; what is important is the timetable for change, and the management of change. I suspect the conflicts set out in clause 2 are not as real as some would have us believe. With good consultation, good land management and a thoughtful approach, hard cases will be few and far between. I agree with the Select Committee that if biodiversity and conservation are threatened, those interests must be paramount. However, we also need to be clear that the countryside provides a landscape, a background and a fabric for people to visit. There would be no point in having a living, working countryside if people could not have access to it.

It is vital that natural England should be truly independent. I heard what the right hon. Gentleman said about the guidance set out by the Secretary of State. He will see, however, that the Bill provides for the guidance to be subject to consultation before it is introduced.

Mr. Letwin *indicated dissent.*

Paddy Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. If I can find my copy of the Bill, I will refer him to the appropriate clause, which makes it clear that the Secretary of State will have to consult natural England and the Environment Agency before guidance is given.

Norman Baker: It is clause 15(3).

Paddy Tipping: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is always helpful in these matters and with whom I share a great deal in this regard.

Natural England will be a public body, spending public money, and it is important that the Secretary of State should have a right to be able to set down some guidance. At the same time, however, I accept the essential point that the right hon. Gentleman made that natural England should be as independent as English Nature was. The Secretary of State was right to remind us that, when English Nature was set up, there were similar complaints and concerns. However, that body has proved itself adequate and totally independent. All hon. Members want that independence for natural England, and I believe that that is what it will deliver.

Mr. Letwin: If the hon. Gentleman looks at *Hansard* in due course, he will see that I very carefully used the term "directions", not "guidance". For the edification of those on the Liberal Benches, clause 15 deals with guidance and clause 16 deals with directions. There is a procedure for consultation under guidance, there is no such procedure under directions. The only thing that the Secretary of State needs to do in regard to directions is to publish them. That is a lacuna. If the hon. Gentleman is now an ally, at least in seeking to modify the direction power to that extent, that is good news.

Paddy Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman has made some interesting points; they were also made by the Select Committee. Natural England needs to be totally independent, and it needs to have the confidence of the people living and working in the countryside. I suspect that those of us who are lucky, or unlucky, enough to serve on the Bill's Standing Committee will have some good discussions on this issue. It is of paramount importance that natural England maintains the independence that English Nature has had in the past.

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman did an excellent job in chairing the sub-Committee that considered this legislation. Does he agree that independence really means the willingness to speak one's mind, irrespective of the consequences, if one is in a position of responsibility? Does he also agree that many of the personnel from English Nature who appeared before the Select Committee gave a robust and critical appraisal of this legislation? They are the same people who will transfer to natural England.

Paddy Tipping: Of course I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, the former Chairman of the Select Committee, that it is important that natural England is as independent as English Nature. Let me remind him of the background. He will remember that when these proposals were announced, there was criticism that English Nature was being disestablished because it had written reports that criticised the Government's approach to genetically modified crops. That was completely wrong. But it is absolutely clear that the staff who work for the new natural England, and the board of natural England, should be totally independent and in a position to criticise the Government. I agree with the right hon. Member for West Dorset when he rightly says that the relationship between natural England and the Environment Agency needs further clarification. Again, that is an issue on which not only is the Secretary of State to issue guidance and direction but on which a good deal of careful work needs to be done by the new

[Paddy Tipping]

body, natural England, and the Environment Agency. That is paramount in the implementation of the water framework directive, which will have a real influence on our landscape and environment. Unless there is a clear understanding between natural England and the Environment Agency of their roles, there is a danger that problems could occur. Again, the Minister would do well to consider that issue during scrutiny of the Bill.

I need to remind Ministers that the Countryside Agency included a rural advocate section, part of which was the body that rural-proofed Government policy. That has been criticised in the past, but I remind Members of the work that has been done on maintaining small schools and extending broadband across rural areas, rural transport initiatives, and maintaining, with difficulty, rural post offices. Those have been successes. There is a strong case for a body such as the commission for rural communities that acts as a watchdog and that, again, is not frightened to criticise the Government. I am delighted that the Government, following the publication of their response to the Select Committee's report, made it clear that the chairperson of the commission will also be the Government's rural advocate, who has traditionally had direct access to the Prime Minister. It is important that the body is independent and is not afraid to criticise the Government and other public authorities—it must be a body with real teeth, which is not afraid of the consequences of doing so. Part of the guidance that we might consider is enshrining that in legislation.

I am more concerned about the third leg of the delivery mechanism—the rural development agencies. It is absolutely right that rural development agencies should, in principle, take responsibility for economic development in rural areas. Their experience and history so far, however, has been patchy.

Mr. Kidney: May I clarify that my hon. Friend is talking about regional development agencies such as Advantage West Midlands, which has been asked to take on more and more rural responsibilities?

Paddy Tipping: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that correction. There are some excellent regional development agencies, such as Advantage West Midlands. I had the privilege to visit the East of England Development Agency, which is at the forefront of working in rural areas. There is real concern, however, that regional development agencies have historically had an urban base, and that the needs of, say, big urban conurbations outweigh those of rural areas. We must ensure that regional development agencies follow through the tasks and guidance with the resources that the Government have made available. That is a potential problem and weakness, which must be monitored carefully.

Ultimately, a whole range of partners and bodies will still work in rural areas. I am concerned about co-ordination, which, again, was an issue raised in evidence to the Select Committee. Natural England will have powers and resources. The Environment Agency will be doing other things. The RDAs will be doing other things. The commission for rural communities will be focusing on other things. It is important that there is co-ordination across the piece, across the regions and across the neighbourhoods. The Secretary of State mentioned that the Government offices would have a role and that regional rural delivery frameworks would need to be set up. It is essential, if we are trying to build rural communities, enhance the environment and lift the landscape, that local needs inform policy. I am not sanguine at the moment that we have the right co-ordination body in our vision. There is a good deal of further work to be done on that issue.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): As a Welsh Member, it ill behoves me perhaps to comment on the creation of natural England, but during the recent election I talked to a lot of regional wildlife recorders in my constituency. They certainly welcomed the proposals that will affect Wales in the Bill. I pick up on my hon. Friend's comment about rural communities. Often, the local wildlife recorders will be the drivers behind local biodiversity issues, and they will be critical to making this Bill a success. All the local wildlife recorders to whom I talked welcomed the provision to extend the duty under section 74 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to conserve and enhance biodiversity to all public bodies. They repeatedly see—I take up the comment that was made by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) about local authorities being a major force in moving that forward—local authorities put under pressure when planning applications are before them to ignore the biodiversity issues, rather than to enhance them.

Paddy Tipping: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I want to build on her comments about local authorities. I am slightly surprised that, in the Bill as it stands, the role of local authorities receives scant attention. She rightly says that, under clause 40 and others, new biodiversity responsibilities are to be placed upon all public authorities, including local authorities. We must ensure that local authorities are key deliverers and part of the package of deliverers to maintain and to enhance the environment. Again, I have been interested to look at some of the pathfinder schemes to see how local authorities have been involved in that way.

I want to make one final point about the direction of the Bill. Again, I pick up on some of the points that have been made by the Opposition. This is a hard change programme. In effect, existing organisations need to keep running while new organisations are built and put in their place. I was interested in the Secretary of State's comment that the timetable would be brought forward to October 2006. I say mildly to my ministerial friend who is now sitting on the Front Bench, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), that that change process will have to be monitored very carefully. Like the right hon. Member for West Dorset, I am not sanguine about the savings that allegedly can be made out of the change process. It is right that we should try to reduce the number of bodies, but the costs of the change may outweigh the savings that are talked about.

Let me give one example. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), the Chairman of the Select Committee, made the point, as did the right hon. Member for West Dorset, about the three methods of

payment. The Secretary of State talked about bringing us more information on how far the discussions had got on that matter. That is an essential element. We need to make progress on it more quickly. We need to monitor change management very stringently.

Mr. Drew: As always, my hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge of this matter. Having chaired the sub-Committee of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, he will know that I raised concerns about schedule 7 and the way in which the different bodies and boards were all subsumed within it. There was discussion about the Agricultural Wages Board being included but, pleasingly, the Government did not go down that road. Does he agree that we must keep that board separate from the new legislation, as it is an important body that needs to be treated in its own right?

Paddy Tipping: I agree that the Agricultural Wages Board is an important body, and I shall make a point on schedule 7, which concerns levy boards. This is enabling legislation and there is widespread agreement that change is necessary, if not inevitable, but when the work is done, the solutions may not be consensual. It is important that the House, Members and outside bodies play an important role in scrutinising whatever comes out of the process. The Bill is right to provide a peg for change—I have no worries about that—but I do worry that the result may not be adequately scrutinised.

Part 6 of the Bill has been mentioned and there is a need again to update rights of way legislation. I am keen for an early commencement date for part 6, for the reasons given by the right hon. Gentleman. It is crazy that people can ride four-wheelers, quad bikes or trail bikes down tracks that were designed for coaches and horses. We must change that situation, and the Bill does just that.

I look forward to the Minister telling me what the commencement date will be but I am told that the reason why a long commencement date is envisaged is that the Government have received legal advice that there are human rights implications. People from Eakering in Nottinghamshire have written to me to say that they have been out with their wheelchairs and pushchairs and have been run down by trail bikes and quad bikes; they know that there are human rights implications. We need action quickly. The Government have not so far published their legal advice and I understand the constraints upon them. But perhaps the Minister will give an undertaking this evening to explain what advice he has received and, at the very least, put a summary of it in the Library.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that it is difficult to imagine how Human Rights Act considerations could possibly necessitate provisions that mean that local authorities may not take into account environmental effects, which is why I suggested that that might be a route through during the interim period.

Paddy Tipping: I am pretty sure that the right hon. Gentleman made a plea that we look at this in Committee and I am sure that we will. There have been 14,800 representations on this issue and we need to get on with it. It is a festering sore that will get worse, not better. At the end of the Bill's scrutiny, I hope that we have a better set of proposals to deal with the problem.

As I have made clear, the Bill is not perfect, but it is a useful step forward and recognises that there have been difficulties in rural areas. There is no point in pretending that the farming sector or rural communities have not faced difficulties. But we must ensure that we do what we have always done on this small island—perceived that the countryside will only live if it is prepared to adapt and change. That is why I welcome the new institutions. I know that they have been criticised but I believe that they are policy instruments that can help us to drive through the change that is so needed to enhance our environment and lift our landscape. I look forward to further discussion of the Bill.

5.55 pm

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): I welcome the fact that the first Second Reading debate of this Parliament is of an environment Bill and I look forward to many more such opportunities during this Parliament.

When I looked at the Bill with my colleagues, we took the view that, by and large, it was a move in the right direction and contained more good than bad. It was an improvement on the present arrangements and although there were issues to be sorted out, we felt that the Bill was worthy of support on Second Reading. Our conclusion is that we should support the Government if there is a Division later this evening.

I listened with interest, as I always do, to the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) in his analysis of the Bill and I agree with much of what he said. He listed those sections that were beneficial and moved matters forward, and he was right in that analysis. He then majored on one or two areas about which he had significant concerns. Those concerns are legitimate and he was right to raise them, but I find it difficult to understand why they are of such magnitude that they justify voting against Second Reading. Those concerns appear to be based on clauses 16 to 25 and the issues of the independence of natural England, in particular, from the Secretary of State and of giving directions.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw the distinction between guidance and directions, and there is a difference in the way in which the Government deal with those matters. It would be advantageous if there were to be consultation on directions, as there is proposed to be on guidance. I hope that an amendment to that effect will be successful in Committee.

However, I do not see the deep conspiracy in the Government's intentions towards natural England that was seen by the right hon. Gentleman. It is normal for the Government to give directions to arm's length bodies of different departments. Indeed, the difference here is that they are in the Bill; we will know what the directions are. If those directions are an attempt to muzzle natural England and are clearly in response to an effective body that is doing its job as we would expect, that will become apparent and the Government will be discredited as a consequence. I would prefer that there were no directions, but if we are to have them, it is better that they are out in the open, rather than behind the scenes.

[Norman Baker]

The great difficulty is that the Government's current power to lean on its agencies inevitably exists in any case. It is there through the budget process, the appointment of members and a number of different matters. The right hon. Gentleman appeared to accept that when he suggested that the change in the Environment Agency's position from that set out by Baroness Young to the one represented today was as a consequence of Government pressure. That, however, is under the present regime, where we do not have these matters in legislation but where apparent pressure is being exerted to force an agency to change its view. How much better, in a sense, if that were out in the open.

I do not dissent form the view of hon. Members around the Chamber that we want natural England to be an independent and effective body, but a relationship with the Government is inevitable and proper. There is bound to be a relationship in terms of the budget and it is better that that be out in the open for scrutiny, rather than behind the scenes, as has so often been the case with quangos. I do not share the fundamental objection to those clauses, and they are open to amendment to try to deal with some of the points that the right hon. Gentleman made.

In terms of independence, time will tell, but a range of bodies have broadly welcomed the proposals on natural England, and that has been influential in terms of our approach to the Bill. We took into account representations from the Wildlife Trusts, the Environment Agency, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Farmers Union and English Nature, all of which broadly welcomed the creation of natural England. Liberal Democrat Members who support that proposal are more in line with those bodies that understand the issues than are Conservative Members, particularly the right hon. Member for West Dorset. Indeed, we Liberal Democrats claim to speak for the countryside more than the Conservatives on this and many other issues—*[Interruption.]* On everything, as my colleagues point out—well, on nearly everything: I shall leave a gap in case a claim could be made for them on one or two issues.

As with any new body, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I remember the National Rivers Authority, which was an effective body under the Conservative Government. Indeed, it was too effective, and was abolished by Nicholas Ridley, if I recall correctly. The Environment Agency was then established in its place. It was seen at the time and was clearly designed as an attempt to muzzle the effectiveness of the NRA. As it turned out, the Environment Agency was pretty effective, so if the Conservatives had that objective for the organisation, they clearly failed in that particular case.

If a variety of functions are transferred to natural England, it will have more clout and be in a better position to stand up for natural countryside issues than even English Nature, which has done a good job, has been. The proof will come when we see how it deals with key issues of importance to the country—I mean the country in both senses of the word. English Nature has a good track record on many issues—for example, in opposing road schemes, as with the Hastings bypass; in standing up against GM crops and the damage that they would inflict on biodiversity; and in opposing Cliffe airport in Kent. I would expect natural England to follow the same line, and there is no reason to believe that it would do otherwise. If the Government started to issue directions to say "Thou shalt not complain about GM crops" or "Thou shalt not oppose road schemes", it would become apparent to many people, and the Government would lose heavily in respect of presentation as a consequence, but I do not believe that that will happen.

Frankly, the right hon. Member for West Dorset raised this issue as an Aunt Sally, which needs to be knocked down. He knows that I usually have considerable time for him, but I hope that he is not falling into the trap of the previous incumbent of his role. In my short time as Liberal Democrat environment spokesman, I have faced a bewildering succession of Conservative Front Benchers—I have lost track of exactly how many. I hope that the newest incumbent stays for rather longer than his predecessor, but they have all fallen into the trap of opposing for the sake of opposition, as has the Conservative party more widely. The Conservatives opposed the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill and they were forced to change their minds on both Iraq and ID cards. Once again, they seem to be adopting positions in order to justify short-term political gain.

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats take a principled position on this matter—assessing the Bill on its merits and supporting it on Second Reading, subject to the caveat that we shall table some amendments in Committee, which will be designed to improve the Bill. We will then look at what emerges on Third Reading and decide whether to support the Bill on the basis of what it looks like at that stage. That seems a far more sensible and constructive approach towards the Bill than we have heard from Conservative Members this afternoon.

Having dealt with the new agency's independence, I shall move on to other issues. The establishment of the so-called commission for rural communities is an important aspect of the Bill and I have to confess to having some sympathy with the Conservative position on it. It is a "guns" rather than a "teeth" body, and it is not clear how effective it will be in championing the interests of the rural communities that it is supposed to represent. Some of the Countryside Agency's powers have been stripped away from it, so it is becoming a very small player in this scene. It seems to me not much more than a shibboleth or a token body, which is there solely to enable the Government of the day to say that they care about and listen to rural communities as evidenced by the establishment of the body. Frankly, in the form proposed in the Bill, it is scarcely worth having. It is neither one thing nor the other; it is neither fish nor fowl. It possesses neither the real teeth nor the powers that it needs to achieve anything worthwhile. Without such powers, it may as well not be there at all. There is the further democratic argument that such powers as it will be allowed could be delivered more properly by local authorities, which, after all, represent people and are accountable to them. Serious questions need to be asked about why the proposed body is justified and whether money could be saved by abolishing it.

Mr. Kidney: The hon. Gentleman is espousing the position of Lord Haskins, who argued in his report that once an integrated agency for delivery was in place,

there was no need for the Countryside Agency, which should be abolished. The hon. Gentleman is consistently setting out Liberal Democrat policy today, so will he confirm that it is his party's official position to have no commission for rural communities?

Norman Baker: Yes, as set out in the Bill and in the light of the structure proposed for natural England, it makes little sense to have such a second body, and we shall advance that viewpoint in greater detail in Committee. When the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), concludes the debate, I should be grateful if he would clarify the budget for this particular body. That would enable Members to assess whether it might be better spent by local authorities, for example, in delivering similar functions.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) about the effectiveness of rural proofing. It seems to me that present arrangements have not been very effective at all in certain regards. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) referred earlier to the Licensing Act 2003, which has been an enormous bureaucratic burden for many small businesses in rural areas. I have heard nothing about that in respect of rural proofing from anyone. One business in my constituency has been happily selling the odd bottle of sherry or whisky to villagers for some considerable time, but must now comply with a gigantic amount of paperwork to qualify to continue to sell such produce under the Licensing Act. The business was even asked to send a detailed sketch of the premises to the district council. Quite why the council needs to know how wide a shop is in order to allow it to sell bottles of sherry is beyond me. The rural proofing element, which is supposed to be present, seems not to have worked terribly well so far, and there is no indication that a smaller body would be any better—it may be worse.

We welcome the rationalised remit of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, which makes absolute sense, and we also welcome the proposals for biodiversity, as set out in clause 40 onwards.

The proposals for tightening up on the improper use of pesticides to kill particular species are welcome, as it is important to tackle that issue. We remain concerned, as I mentioned previously, about whether a law of unintended consequences might apply. We must ensure that the Bill does not catch unintentionally those who have legitimate uses for such products. That applies most obviously to the farming community, but it could apply to someone with a garden shed in Luton. We must ensure that neither are caught by the proposals. Will the Minister scrutinise the wording further to ensure that that will not happen?

Clause 49 provides another welcome initiative, dealing with the sale of invasive, non-native species. It must be right to tackle that issue, which has been the cause of enormous problems in the countryside over many decades. I am sure that Members will be aware of many examples in respect of both flora and fauna. Missing from the clause, however, is any recognition that the problem needs to be turned back. In other words, we need to make progress in unwinding some of the damage that has already been done. A case could be made for the Secretary of State to produce an extra schedule to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which could be used to identify particular species. Duties could be given to local authorities, providing that they were properly recompensed, or to natural England to ensure that further ingression did not occur. We must roll some of it back, particularly with respect to species such as Japanese knotweed. Far too little has been done so far. Clause 49 should go further, as we shall explain in greater detail in Committee.

I should also mention the Forestry Commission. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee asked why that commission's work was not included in natural England's remit. On the face of it, there is a good argument for saying that it should be. If people are concerned about overlapping functions and lack of clarity between bodies, they should bear in mind the potential for significant overlap and lack of clarity between natural England and the Forestry Commission. The Government's response to the Select Committee that everything will be all right on the night did not strike me as particularly convincing. I hope that the Minister will look at that again when the Bill is in Committee and as it goes through the House of Lords. We want to ensure that natural England works and that therefore wherever possible different organisations are not pointing in different directions.

The issue of bodies having overlapping functions and how that might be dealt with was raised by the right hon. Member for West Dorset and the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping). At present, of course, there are bodies with overlapping functions and those that can take their remit to a degree that overlaps another's territory. There is nothing new about that. The Bill simplifies matters and reduces the potential for confusion. That is not to say that confusion has been entirely eliminated, but there could be less than at present. Nevertheless, there is a case for clear guidance on which bodies do what, and the Government should take the opportunity to make that guidance clear during the passage of the Bill so that we may analyse the various functions of the different bodies—perhaps through some organogram—and assess how they relate to each other. That has not been done so far. I know that No. 10 is fond of organograms, so perhaps it can help.

I turn to the question of rights of way and to what in some ways is the most controversial part of this legislation—certainly outside the House. I entirely agree with the observations of the right hon. Member for West Dorset and the hon. Member for Sherwood about the commencement date and the need to deal with that quickly. Governments always recognise that they should not announce on Budget day a date 12 months ahead when fuel duty, for example, will change, enabling people to stock up their garages with petrol. Any change is made from 6 pm that evening in an attempt to avoid that problem. The Government recognise that when legislation is to the disbenefit of particular groups, such as the motorist, or when it prevents those who wish to use four-wheel drives or off-roaders in a certain way, it makes sense to limit the time to exploit the loophole that might be created.

It is very worrying that the Government have not yet given a commencement date. I urge the Minister to take on board Members' points. The danger is that if no commencement date is given or it is miles ahead, the problem that the Government are trying to address will

[Norman Baker]

not be cured but will be exacerbated by the arrangements proposed in the Bill. That would be a tragedy that nobody in the House wants. We must deal with the matter head on and not worry too much about what lawyers are saying. It is clear what people want to happen. I suspect that there is near enough unanimity in the House on the provisions and, as the hon. Member for Sherwood said, we should get on with it.

Although there is unanimity on the issue, personally I would go further. Roads used as public paths were not designed—if they were designed at all—for the uses to which they are put nowadays. In fact, they evolved for the use of different classes of vehicle. They evolved for the use predominantly of horses and walkers—perhaps even cyclists, although that is difficult on occasions—and of farmers accessing their property. Those are perfectly normal countryside uses. When the destinations were created, it was not envisaged that such roads—as they technically are—would be used by people who deliberately churn them up, preventing other legitimate users from accessing them. The chance of getting a horse down a path that some four-wheel driver has deliberately churned up by going in first gear and seeing how high they can rev is pretty remote.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I have listened to my hon. Friend's point; the Bill will probably make some progress on the matter. Does he agree that now is the time for a fundamental look at legislation that deals with rights of way, to bring it up to the modern requirements of those who want to use it and of the land over which the rights of way cross?

Norman Baker: I agree; the Government had an open consultation exercise to which they received a large number of responses—14,000 I think the Minister said—but they have tried to do the impossible and to find some theoretical mid-point that satisfies everybody, as they did with hunting. There is not a mid-point with hunting; there is either a for or an against, as there is over rights of way. There are legitimate views on either side of the argument, but a mid-point satisfies nobody. The provisions in the Bill are welcome in so far as they will limit further damage if introduced quickly, but they will do nothing to undo the damage of legitimate use of roads used as public paths. The Government have ducked that issue; it should have been addressed in the Bill, but has not.

I conclude by reiterating my main point that we welcome the Bill in principle. The Government are right to address the issue. There is a number of sensible provisions in the Bill. There are legitimate questions to be asked in Committee about some of the consequences, but those who value the countryside and who have read the views of the NFU, English Nature, the RSPB and others would be perverse in the extreme if they sought to vote against the Bill on Second Reading.

6.16 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): I heard on the radio this morning that the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who just got up to leave but has now sat down again, was to make a speech today about beauty. I instantly thought that it would be made in this debate, but my hopes were shattered within minutes when it was announced that it was to be made elsewhere. That is a pity, because we could have enjoyed a great speech from him in a debate on the natural environment in this Chamber. It was left to the Secretary of State to give a wonderful, lyrical description of the great beauty of our natural environment, including the alliteration of Shakespeare's "silver sea". I am sorry that the shadow Secretary of State has come off second best in the Chamber, but I hope that the speech that he delivered elsewhere received the reception that it deserved.

I was not a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in the previous Parliament and took no part in the pre-legislative scrutiny, but I read the draft Bill and strongly support pre-legislative scrutiny as a general process for this Parliament to follow. It is satisfying to read, in the many briefings that I have received in preparation for this debate, that so many organisations took part in the pre-legislative scrutiny, making some sensible suggestions that were mirrored in the recommendations of the Select Committee's report. It was also satisfying that, in their response to the Select Committee, the Government accepted many of those suggestions and recommendations. The exchange between the shadow Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) highlighted a case in point. The Select Committee recommended several detailed changes to the provisions on guidance, all of which the Government accepted. That is a positive note on which to begin the passage of the Bill.

It is important to put the Bill in context as a crucial component of the Government's rural strategy. It is worth reminding ourselves that, among many other good things in that strategy, there is an intention to reduce 100 funding streams to three and to offer farmers a single payment scheme in what is increasingly becoming a whole-farm approach to regulation—be it inspections, audits or funding issues. The Bill contributes to the deregulatory direction of the strategy by bringing the three organisations dealing with the natural environment and conservation into one body and thereby providing one focal point for the customers of the natural environment such as land managers.

In essence, this is a deregulatory Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood pointed out, this will be the first Bill to receive its Second Reading in this Parliament, and it is a deregulatory Bill. Just as the emphasis on the environment for the first debate in this Chamber is welcome, so is the deregulatory nature of the Bill—keeping promises that the Government have made. As a Bill that deregulates, does away with duplication and streamlines bureaucracy, it is inevitable that the Tories oppose it. I thought that they were in favour of deregulation, but apparently not when it comes to any particular Bill.

The Bill will be good for sustainable development and the natural environment, and some of the briefings that I have received show just how popular it is. The Wildlife and Countryside Link tells me that it supports the establishment of natural England as

"a powerful champion for our natural environment".

The Wildlife Trusts also welcomes the establishment of natural England and points out that we face many challenges in ensuring England's biodiversity, including

climate change, protecting the marine environment and regionalisation—I know what it means by that. For example, how far does the natural environment of the coastline extend into the marine environment, especially as the Government propose another Bill on marine issues?

The Woodland Trust warmly welcomed the Bill, because it foresees that natural England will be a strong and independent body. Its briefing states that it will be a body

"adopting a landscape scale approach which looks beyond designated sites, allied to a strong focus on adaptation to climate change [and] the possession of a strong regional presence".

All those issues require our urgent attention, retaining the regional and local focus of some of the work that has been done. We need to be able to withstand the pressures for economic development because the natural environment should come first. I am sure that we will explore such tensions in Committee.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): I accept the statements by the bodies that the hon. Gentleman mentions, but can he assure us that natural England will have the independence necessary to be a powerful body?

Mr. Kidney: That is a good point and it was raised many times in the pre-legislative scrutiny responses that I mentioned. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was specifically asked to give an assurance about the independence of natural England and I do not think that she could have said more strongly than she did that it will be independent. Concern has been expressed about the direction provisions in the Bill, but similar provisions apply to the Environment Agency, the Countryside Agency and, since 1990, to English Nature. It was satisfying to hear the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) talk about the independent nature of those who work for English Nature. I totally agreed with his assessment of their ability and capacity.

The Bill will be good for rural communities. It is important that we will retain the policy advice and advocacy role of the Countryside Agency in the form of the commission for rural communities. I disagree with Lord Haskins on that and with the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) and the Liberal Democrats. The CRC will have an important role to play, including the promotion of the meeting of rural needs in ways consistent with sustainable development, with bodies such as local authorities. Its functions will involve representation, providing information and advice and monitoring. They will also include rural-proofing, about which I shall have more to say. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman cannot wait.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman think that DEFRA could not undertake the role that the CRC will be given? If DEFRA did, it would allow us the opportunity to hold the Government to account for how those duties are performed. It will be more difficult to hold the CRC to account.

Mr. Kidney: That is a reasonable argument but, to give one example of rural-proofing, the Countryside Agency has named and shamed Departments that do not take into account the impact of their policies in rural areas. That job is a good one for a body at arm's length from the Government to do, and it receives the hearing that it deserves in the media and among parliamentarians and Departments. I argue that the CRC would do a better job than DEFRA, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument.

Mr. Breed: The remaining function of the Countryside Agency will be to perform that very role and it will be a critical part of the spectrum. The rump of the CA could also undertake the rural-proofing role to ensure that it is effective and the local authorities could get on with the rest of the job.

Mr. Kidney: If the hon. Gentleman and I both serve in Committee, I look forward to taking the debate further. I disagree with him that others could perform that role, for reasons on which I would be happy to expand in Committee. I say with no great certainty that the CRC will be up to the job, but the role of rural advocate—and direct access to No. 10—will be an important part of having a strong voice for rural communities at the heart of Government. That is what the CRC is intended to be. However, I have concerns about rural-proofing and about the loss of other good work that the Countryside Agency performed, such as seedcorn funding for projects at local level in rural communities and the vital villages programme. That will be lost to the CRC and pass to the regional development agencies. It worries me that a thematic programme that was designed especially with rural areas in mind will be diluted to the regions. If, as I hope, the CRC is to be a watchdog that speaks up for rural areas, it should be able to pick up such programmes.

The Bill builds on much good work that has already been done. The Countryside Agency has done good work and English Nature has been a superb defender of our rural and natural environments, with a direct impact on our constituencies. I am happy to give examples from my constituency of work done by those bodies. For example, Cannock Chase is a huge expanse of what was once a royal hunting forest and is now managed by Staffordshire county council. It has one area of outstanding natural beauty and several sites of special scientific interest, all supported by the work of English Nature and the Countryside Agency. Doxey marshes, an area visited by birds from all over the world, is managed by Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, which benefits from advice and assistance from English Nature and the Countryside Agency. The wetland meadows at Wheaton Aston are owned and managed by English Nature and provide a superb example of that habitat that would not exist without that body's work. The work that the Countryside Agency has done with grants for bus services and rural transport partnerships, such as that in west Staffordshire, has helped to devise innovative ways to ensure that people from the smallest villages can reach the bus routes so that they can go where they want by public transport—truly, a success that has benefited many people in my constituency and in others all over the country.

The Countryside Agency has worked on improvements to rights of way and the creation of local access forums. With British Waterways, its work on the canal network and towpaths has been important in areas such as my constituency, which is criss-crossed by

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three canals. Great work has already been done by the predecessor organisations. They deserve Parliament's thanks and praise and I hope, as they do, that by combining their efforts in one agency they will do even greater work for the benefit of our constituencies and our country.

I know less about the rural development service, another of the predecessor organisations. I am told that, as a directorate of DEFRA, it manages the agri-environment scheme. The British Ecological Society has asked us to ensure that some of DEFRA's science budget goes from that directorate to natural England, so I am happy to tell my hon. Friend the Minister that that sounds like a good idea.

Lord Haskins's report was an important forerunner to work on the strategy and the Bill, as was the Curry report. Each led to the Government producing substantial strategy documents—the sustainable farming and food strategy and the rural strategy. Parliament, too, has done good work on which the Bill can build. We passed the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which opened up mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land to open access. Each time that a new area is mapped and made subject to open access, there are ever greater outpourings of praise from walkers and others who enjoy our countryside, with many thanks to people such as us who have made that possible.

As has been mentioned before, we also passed the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, which has had some influence by giving local authorities and parish councils new powers to clean up their local environment. There are good things in the Bill and good things have been done in preparation for it.

I turn to some of the challenges ahead where more attention is required. The first of these is in the field of rural-proofing. I give credit to the Countryside Agency for what it has already done. During its short existence, it has made an impact nationally in rural-proofing by naming and shaming Departments that were formerly incapable of devising policies that could be assessed for their application to the special challenges and needs of rural areas and of distinguishing where a different solution was required. As a result of naming and shaming year after year, the last rural-proofing report that I read showed that only two Departments were not pulling their weight in that regard. By then, the Countryside Agency had extended its rural-proofing activities to the Government offices of the regions. Although that was only a couple of years ago, the agency has been able to report that some improvements are visible.

We need to look beyond that and consider the rural-proofing of the policies of regional development agencies and every local council. If the Countryside Agency is to be reduced to a rump, as the hon. Member for Lewes described the commission, which will none the less be responsible for issues such as monitoring, research and advice, is it really the body that can take forward the rural-proofing agenda and extend it to RDAs and local government while still retaining the influence that the agency has developed over the past few years? I have my doubts and I want to be assured that what we are putting in place of the Countryside Agency's rural-proofing will be effective in the future.

Regional development agencies have recently been given the Countryside Agency's economic function and it is important to look beyond the economic activity of RDAs to the social, environmental and rural issues for which they are now responsible. When Advantage West Midlands, the west midlands RDA, was set up, its focus was on economic activity and on urban rather than rural areas. Over time that has changed. The biggest single factor was the disastrous foot and mouth disease outbreak and its effects on many businesses, far beyond what some people anticipated at the time. The response and support given to rural businesses was fantastic, thanks to Advantage West Midlands moving so quickly. The agency saw that the importance of the rural economy went beyond farming and it has developed much better policies, so I have more confidence in RDAs now. However, when I look back at their short existence and the economic regeneration focus in the Act that established them, I wonder whether they have developed so far beyond their statutory basis that we should consider amending it. The Bill may not be the place for that, but the commission for rural communities should consider whether we are getting a fair deal from RDAs in rural areas.

Lord Haskins had a clear vision that much of what was needed involved the devolution of power and service delivery to regional and local areas. Rightly, he saw local councils at the sharp end of delivering services because they are the elected, publicly accountable bodies—not the quangos in their offices in places such as Birmingham, but the local councils elected every four years. He thought that they would be much more in the driving seat under the new system for the delivery of services, but I am not sure that we have yet seen the devolution of power to them and the accountability from them that we should have.

I think that there are two places in the Bill where local authorities are mentioned: the extension of the biodiversity duty to councils and the possibility that new organisations such as natural England and the commission may enter agreements with local councils to deliver services on their behalf. The Government's response to the Select Committee included the example that licensing functions could be carried out by local councils on behalf of natural England. That is not a great response to Lord Haskins's call for democratically accountable, elected local government to take a leading role. I want to prod the Government by reminding them of some of their promises, especially during the recent election campaign, to encourage them to look further at that matter.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Is not the hon. Gentleman arguing against himself? He has just praised RDAs and the devolution to them of the Countryside Agency's rural development responsibilities, yet he decries the fact that county councils have not been given enough responsibilities. Surely if all the Countryside Agency's work had gone to county and district councils, there would be no need for

the commission for rural communities as a bureaucratic body overseeing another bureaucratic body, neither of which is accountable.

Mr. Kidney: I do not agree for two reasons. First, I was praising not the giving of powers to RDAs, but my RDA in the west midlands for getting better. I made the point that I am not particularly satisfied that the statutory basis for the existence of RDAs is good enough for the roles that we envisage for them. In that sense, I was not praising RDAs, so I am consistent in saying that I prefer those roles to be taken by local government.

Clearly, the commission for rural communities will not have such roles. It will advise the Government and monitor what happens on the ground, so its role would be valid even if we gave all the new roles to councils, because the Government still need to hear where the problems are and, indeed, where the best practice is, and the commission is the body to have that role.

I want to remind the Government why local authorities having a greater role in the delivery of those services and rural communities fits with the Government's pronouncements. I shall quote a speech made by the new Minister of Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband), whose speech was obviously so good at Nottingham on 20 May that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published it as a pamphlet. Although it was a speech to the English Core Cities Group and it clearly focuses mostly on cities and larger towns, it has universal application because it reminds us all that Labour's last election manifesto said that we would promote effective action even at neighbourhood levels. My right hon. Friend said:

"Local solutions need to be organised locally, and local government is there to make it happen."

However, there is another quote that is excellent to pray in aid of my point. He says:

"The modern world places a premium on people and places who or which have knowledge, creativity and networks, so countries which succeed will be those where there are many points of dynamism and innovation, not a single national plan. That is why I see local government as a key agent not just to help central government deliver on national priorities, but as a leader and shaper of local priorities."

I wholly endorse that statement, which should apply to this issue as to any other.

I shall move on—a slight digression—to give a case study of the kind of problem that rural areas come up against frequently and need people to help them to cut through to the necessary outcome. The Staffordshire biomass project, which hon. Members may have seen featured prominently on Channel 4 news just yesterday, involves more than 40 farmers who farm more than 1,200 hectares in Staffordshire. They plant miscanthus—elephant grass—to burn to produce power and, later, heat as well. An industrial estate will be an end user.

The scheme will be carbon neutral because the growing elephant grass takes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, just as burning the grass creates carbon dioxide. The scheme meets many of the Government's policy objectives, such as those on climate change; on farmers diversifying, into growing non-food crops in this case; and on science and innovation leading to new industries and jobs—for example, Talbott's Heating Ltd. of Stafford makes the converters that burn the crops, creating the heat and power.

The project has been good enough to receive grants from DEFRA and the Department of Trade and Industry, yet those involved are still unable to secure its future, although it is a wonderful addition to our renewable energy sources in this country, partly because the excess electricity produced by the scheme needs to be sold into the grid and the project cannot find an electricity company that is willing to guarantee it a long enough contract at a high enough price to make the scheme stack up.

Thus Government help is needed to extend the system of renewal obligation certificates beyond the current end date of 2017. A review of the renewables obligation is under way, and more people need to be given access to renewable obligation certificates so that such projects need not go to third parties for support. Perhaps the Government need to use their good offices to lend a helping hand to secure the use of biomass to generate electricity. Failing that, perhaps the Government need to ensure a minimum price for producing electricity with that source of energy, just as they guarantee a minimum price for renewable energy provided by the emerging tidal and wave technology.

I hope that the Minister can take away from the debate the fact that there are some serious issues in Staffordshire right now that involve a renewable energy project that meets all the Government's obligations and yet is still not secure, although it wants to be, and the Government can do much to help it to ensure that it is.

All that shows my role as a rural advocate, until we have the commission to do such work for me, but I now want to measure the Bill against the rural delivery review of 2003. A quote from Haskins is worthy of repeating. On page 8 of the report he said:

"I would like to see rural delivery in England becoming much more decentralised than it is, with key decisions being taken at regional and local levels. This is where services can most effectively address public need and where deliverers can be held more clearly to account."

The Bill and the rural strategy contain some movements towards the views stated by Haskins, especially in clarifying the roles for policy making and delivery, but is enough in place to establish the regional and local accountability that he called for in his report? I am not sure whether we are there yet, and I hope that we can examine that in detail in Committee. Haskins reminded us that the direct customers of the new set up will include land managers, non-land-based rural businesses and rural communities, but he helpfully reminds us, too, of the indirect beneficiaries—all the visitors to the countryside every year, those who live and work in rural areas and, indeed, taxpayers, who pay for those services.

I am backing the Bill, which will make the most of our natural environment—the beauty of our landscape, the marvel of its biodiversity and the human desire to enjoy both—while contributing to helping farmers reconnect with markets and strengthen their role in the food chain, and supporting myriad other rural enterprises. Rural businesses are now growing at a greater rate than those in urban areas. The Bill will also stand up for the quarter of the population who live in rural locations, while facilitating visitors—obviously, sustainable tourism

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only is required—to our countryside. More than 1 billion visitor days contribute over £10 billion a year to local economies. This is the sort of Bill that can made rural winners of us all.

6.47 pm

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): The health and sustainable prosperity of the countryside and rural economy are extremely important to my constituents in south Wiltshire. That was evident during the general election campaign. I spoke at 22 public meeting during the campaign—and I assure hon. Members that the environment featured at every one of them, because I made sure that it did—and important questions were raised and discussed.

Although I had hoped to see a Conservative Member of Parliament representing South Dorset, it is nevertheless a great pleasure to welcome the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), to the Dispatch Box tonight. It will be a pleasure doing business with him. It is reassuring to know that there is Member of Parliament for central southern England who represents the broader views of our part of the country in his Department, and I wish him well.

I was quite overwhelmed that I had briefings from 16 different organisations for this debate on Second Reading, from the National Gamekeepers Organisation to the Woodland Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and all the others. This is a matter of intense importance to a very large number of people. I therefore broadly welcome most of the Bill. I share the reservations expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and therefore will have pleasure in supporting his amendment.

One of the first things that I should like to mention—I plan to be mercifully brief—is the machinery of Government issue. Haskins had a good point when he said that how delivery took place was very important to those who would be empowered by the function at stake; but, too often in this country, we simply have not made up our minds about whether we want to have centralised power in Whitehall or whether we genuinely want to devolve decision making, and the money that goes with it, to local authorities.

I hope very much that, in thinking about the way forward for the Conservative party in the coming months, we will at least be able to say that the time has surely come to reverse the trend of the past 20 years, to my certain knowledge—I was part of it, as a Local Government Minister—to centralise, but we must ensure that the money follows. That is always the problem. We can have great discussions with local authorities, the Local Government Association and all the others, but in the end, the Treasury has the finger on the till.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset might think that it is not a very good idea to establish natural England and to give it a lot of fairly arbitrary power, but the position could be worse. Only last week, when I was in France observing the remarkable referendum proceedings, I spoke to Mr. Arnaudinaud, the mayor of St. Michel l'Ecluse et Leparon, and he told me the frustrations of being a mayor in a devolved local government system. He said that he was responsible for the delivery of environmental policies for forests in his commune. Two years ago, his and 29 other communes obtained the signatures of three Government Ministers for a project for the satellite observation of fires in the forest areas of south-west France. However, because of all the local government interests, the brakes were on at every turn and the project still could not be delivered even though the Ministers' signatures and the money were lined up. The position could be worse, and I was able to assure him that we did not do business like that in England. I hope that I am right.

Above all, as an old-timer in this place, I want to say how much I appreciate the quality of the specialists and scientists in the Countryside Agency, and particularly English Nature. I have worked with them for many years, and they are absolute stars. I hope very much that their work will be valued in the transition that will occur.

I agree that the commission for rural communities will have a lot of functions that could have been given to local government. If we wish to see how not to do it, we need only to look at the South West regional assembly in my region to see how locally elected councillors at county and district level feel that they have been disempowered by the process. Although they are indirectly represented, much of the power to make decisions affecting planning, schools and transport is now at the regional assembly, rather than local authority, level. I wish the councillors well none the less.

The second point that I wish to make is about clause 40 and biodiversity. I am delighted to see this provision as it represents important progress. I welcome the clause, but I wish that it went a little further. It says that local authorities must "have regard" to biodiversity, but I hope that, in Committee, we will be able to persuade the Government to say that local authorities should "further biodiversity". "Have regard" does not mean anything at all except "Good morning. What a nice day", but a provision furthering biodiversity would be welcomed by wildlife trusts across the country and by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust in particular.

On a good day, local authorities already provide quite a lot of taxpayers' money for such functions. For example, in my area the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust receives money from the county council and Salisbury district council for the biological record centres that are vital if local authorities are to know where the rich wildlife sites are or, indeed, used to be. Such centres are a key data tool for biodiversity protection, enhancement and restoration as well as making it possible to produce all the reports that are now necessary. The county and district contribute to the biological record centres, the wildlife sites project, ecological footprint studies by volunteers and so on.

Quite a lot of money is going in, and I am pleased to see that the clause makes it clear that the term "local authorities" specifically includes parish councils. I would be grateful if the Minister could say something about how he envisages the role of parish councils. They are an important part of our local government structure. I know that it is true that 50 per cent. of our country is not parished. Those of use who represent parished areas perhaps do not realise that, but it is true. We therefore need to be a bit clearer on what the role of parish councils might be.

My third and final comment is about part 6 and rights of way. I should declare an interest as a fully paid-up member of the Motorcycle Action Group. Although I do not ride a motor bike, when I was Minister for Roads and Traffic, I formulated motor cycling policy and became quite a convert to the activity. I remain a convert and champion of it, and that is why I was disappointed that the British Motorcyclists Federation put out a press release last week deploring the Government's actions in respect of rights of way. We must tackle the issue head on and go for an early commencement date. My highway authority, Wiltshire county council, has been inundated with hundreds of applications—I think 400 in that area alone—and it is a serious issue.

We must make it clear to those who use our lanes what they are doing. More than a year ago, I spent a day with an off-road club four-by-fouring in south Wiltshire's green lanes. I talked to trail bikers, had meetings with them and tried to understand where they were coming from. Many of them are responsible, genuine, careful people who do much good in supervising rallies and so on, and some of them—especially the Trail Riders Fellowship—mend tracks, keep back hedges and keep roads open. However, they are let down by the vast majority who do not act in that way and who have ruined miles and miles of ancient, historic and beautiful rights of way in my constituency and right across the south of England and beyond. It is a tragedy that that has happened, and I feel that most of those people have no idea of the damage that they do. It is totally inappropriate to put powerful bikes or four-by-fours on to very delicate surfaces that are only earth tracks most of the time. Many tracks have no foundations, and they are ruined for ever.

Many of the riders do not realise the significance of the routes that they use; they do not look at the maps and realise that they might be running along a road that went from Lincolnshire to the south coast in pre-Roman times. As in the case of Mack's lane in Grimstead in my constituency, the riders are interested only in opening up another 400 m so that they can power their vehicles through and get a thrill from it. I am sorry, but that has got to stop, otherwise those tracks will not exist for future generations. I hope that the riders will understand that, in the interests of the majority, we simply have to say no.

If anyone doubts that the majority is involved, I can tell them that, 18 months ago, I was contacted by 100 per cent. of the parish councils in my area and 100 per cent. of them said that we had to stop such activities. They said Parliament had a duty to them and to future generations to stop the conflict between pedestrians, horse riders and people with buggies and those who wish to use totally inappropriate motor vehicles.

Mr. Roger Williams: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there are responsible users of motor cycles and four-wheel-drive vehicles. Surely part of the answer to the problem is to provide facilities so that they can enjoy their activities without destroying the tracks that they use.

Robert Key: That is right, and it brings us to the issue of the recreational use of farmland. We have had our little arguments with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about that, and we have come to a sensible compromise. The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that there are alternative routes and my county council has spent a lot of money preparing basic gravel and stone tracks that are more appropriate. We must be sensible, and I hope that the riders will be sensible too. I believe and hope that they will be.

I broadly welcome the Bill and will fight in Committee to see whether we can make changes. I am sure that the Minister is keen to reciprocate our good will, so I shall finish my short speech by saying that we shall return to these issues. Whenever the Government decide that it is time to change structures for delivery, it is reasonable to assume that, within a few years, they will want to change them again. Let us not kid ourselves that we are writing anything in stone with the creation of these agencies. However, the Bill represents a good start. I wish it well.

6.59 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Noting the packed Labour Benches behind me and given the intense competition that will ensue, I humbly offer my services as a member of the Committee that will consider the Bill. I trust that it will be considered in Committee.

There are matters that the Government could consider adding to the Bill. I echo the comments that have been made about the importance of local democracy—for example, the points made by the hon. Member for Salisbury (Robert Key) about the importance of parish councils. In constituencies of all sorts where parish councils exist—there are more than 60 in my constituency—it is clear that their remit and role is too small. They should be given greater powers. However, we may differ when I say that that move should be twinned with a coherence of local government structure that removes the duality of district and county councils in areas such as the one that I represent. In the context of rural communities—in England, my Labour constituency has the most trees in its 500 square miles—the Government may wish to consider that we might be better served by the abolition of the two-tier system of local government and the introduction of unitary authorities, allowing parish councils a greater say over the longer term. There would be a coherence in the strength of local government rather than the paper chase that I have witnessed on many issues between district and county. I am sure that, if not during consideration of the Bill, sense will prevail at some stage during this Parliament and we shall consider the financial savings to council tax payers in Bassetlaw and elsewhere that would result in the implementation of such a sensible proposition.

As for clause 78, it would perhaps take not only a leap of logic but also some bravery on the part of the Government to see whether one of the new boards should consider one of the changing features of the rural landscape, and that is the labour market. I had an interesting meeting with the National Farmers Union during the general election. It wished to talk to me about immigration problems. It said that it was facing difficulties because of the ever stricter controls on work permits that were being introduced by the Government. In the heat of the general election, I encouraged the NFU in a considered way to raise the issue in public debate.

Some newspapers and some parties were concerned to ensure that a vigorous debate should take place on immigration issues. I trust that we can now have a

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considered and continuing debate on the issue. In the area that I represent, it is estimated that 3,000 migrant workers work in farms every summer. During the four years of my incumbency, there has been a move from fairly large-scale unemployment to full employment. There is an unskilled labour shortage for the first time for 40 to 50 years. There will be increasing demands from farmers in my area to build to access the Iraqis, for example, who are here at the moment. There are also the Poles, the Ukrainians and the Malaysians who were here last summer. There are members of other nationalities who are contributing to the profitability and the sustainability of key sections of English agriculture.

It is incumbent on various bodies, not least the NFU, to highlight exactly how they see the future of labour markets for the agricultural work force. I do not believe that in a community such as the one that I represent we shall be able to provide sufficient people—our youth—to volunteer to work the fields, picking peas and strawberries, for example, in the way in which people have done for centuries. If we are to sustain an English agriculture industry—I am sure that this applies also to Wales and Scotland—we are faced with a key issue. The conditions in which people are working and living become paramount because there is a great difference between the enlightened employer and others.

Enlightened employers offer a modicum of reasonable payment, relatively good living conditions and a social programme. For example, there are farmers who partake of the opportunity to visit the Palace of Westminster on day trips every summer, which I have facilitated for them. There are other employers who are much less convinced of the need to look after their work force in terms of the pay, conditions and opportunities that they grant their employees. The issue will continue to return on the agenda, although perhaps not too directly because it is not spoken about as often as it should by members of the farming community. That is because in my constituency, as in others, there are many wanderers. They may be described in terms that are less endearing than those that are applied to legally and gainfully employed agricultural workers. They are described as asylum seekers, for example. The approach is sometimes rather hostile in their presence.

Consideration should be given by the Government to agricultural labour and migrant labour from Europe and beyond so that we avoid problems with gangmasters, for example.

Mr. Brian Binley (Northampton, South) (Con): I accept some of the things that the hon. Gentleman is saying about work permits. Does he agree that a proper system of work permits is entirely reliant upon a proper system of border controls?

John Mann: A work permit system needs to ensure that people are able to work in the UK if there is a demand for them, and that those people are working legally. It is not only farmers in the rural section of my constituency who demand this. Horse traders, for example, are demanding the ability to bring in jockeys from Mauritius, but they have been barred from doing so by the Home Office. The trainers' case is that there are not enough small men in England to train the future Derby and Grand National winners, for example. There should be a board to examine the pay and conditions of such people to ensure that they are here legally and properly remunerated. That may go beyond the scope of the Bill, but I am sure that there will be the opportunity to consider such matters in greater detail in Committee.

I am more confident that the Government will be prepared to examine that issue than the next matter that I raise, which is land ownership. I spent a rather pleasant three days in the Brecon Beacons. I am not sure whether I was in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Williams). I saw his rather garish orange-bedecked office while I was there. During more pleasant times in the past few days, I took the opportunity legally to trample on some of the land now open to us mere commoners. I noted that some of the routes that have historic rights, which could previously be walked, were the coffin roads. These roads took people from the collieries of south Wales back to agricultural lands. These were the bodies of people who died in the early days of the mining industry. They worked in terrible conditions.

In my constituency, the dukeries had many such collieries. There were the four dukes who owned, and still own, most of the land. They profited greatly. A modest contribution that the Government could contemplate would be to take the ethos of private ownership and emancipation a stage further by allowing tenant farmers, who for centuries have farmed the land in my area, the opportunity to buy the land—for a modest, reasonable and perhaps peppercorn price—that they and their families have farmed so that they may become farmer owners rather than farmer tenants.

In some ways, that was a demand of the original Labour party in its early days and going back to the 1890s. The third-term Labour Government have an opportunity to examine issues of land ownership and to show that our party is the friend of the farmer, particularly the tenant farmer. Such people should be given the opportunity of ownership and entrepreneurship. Their land should not able to be disposed of by the diktat of a landowner; they should be able to benefit their families by bequeathing their land—not just the tenancy—from father to son or father to daughter. Judging by the nods I see from Opposition Back Benchers, I am sure that such a proposal would have all-party support.

It seems to me that there could be no more populist cry from all quarters of the House than the right to gas. In my four years in Parliament, I have been amazed that the House has not promoted the right to gas more strongly. We know much about the subject—4.5 million of our constituents across Britain do not have a gas supply. I hope that the Labour party will have the wisdom to include such a right in our next election manifesto, if it cannot be squeezed into the Bill or some other measure. To give people in all parts of the country, and particularly in areas such as mine, the right to gas would be a very popular move, especially in rural communities and mining villages that do not have access to a gas supply. It is clear that suppliers in the so-called competitive gas market are not interested in extending their supply to more remote villages, but are content merely to compete in areas that already have a supply or new estates. We should give the whole population the right to gas.

Part 6 deals with an issue that I have raised many times. Many right hon. and hon. Members signed my early-day motion on the subject—*[Interruption.]*—and I am sure that the hon. Members heckling me were among the first to sign it when I resubmitted it in this Parliament. It urges the Government to tackle the menace of motor bikes and quad bikes on our bridleways and footpaths. We raised the problem in an unsuccessful ten-minute Bill in the last Parliament, early-day motions, Adjournment debates and contributions to other debates. I spoke about it on many occasions and raised it privately with Ministers. We have to deal with the legal anomaly that has allowed organised groups—in particular, the Trail Riders Fellowship and the Land Access and Recreation Association—to submit thousands of applications to upgrade a bridleway or footpath to a byway open to all traffic, based merely on the existence of an historical right for horses and carts to use them. In the Littleborough area of my constituency, that historical right is based on the route of a Roman road. If such a right is deemed to exist, an application can lead to a route being upgraded automatically, with no other factors—opposition to the application, environmental damage, present land use, other uses of the footpath or bridleway, or changes in the built environment—being taken into consideration. After such an upgrade, any motorised vehicle can be used on the route.

That loophole needs to be closed and I am pleased to see that action is being taken. I hope that the Standing Committee will examine the matter in minute detail to ensure that in closing one loophole, we do not open another. The problems do not arise from nowhere. Highly organised groups are involved. Their websites contain clear advice from solicitors and others on how to submit an application or applications to cover every part of an area. In some areas in my constituency, 20 or 30 applications have been made in respect of land that completely surrounds a village. That has happened before many of the historical maps have been fully examined; the applications submitted so far are the easy ones.

The public meetings that I held in my constituency during the election campaign and will continue to hold attracted mass turnouts and strong views were expressed—people are demanding action. Horse riders told of their horses being spooked by a quad bike, motor bike or four-wheel drive vehicle. The idea that the drivers of such vehicles are present in the area at random is false. My investigations in the Warsop area in my constituency—a group of mining villages plagued by the problem—revealed an organised competitive sport. White vans appear, motor bikes and scrambling bikes without number plates are taken out and raced around for an hour or two, then they are put back in the van and off they go. People are paying to be taken to my constituency and elsewhere to conduct their activities.

I urge caution regarding the concept of organised places for such activities. In my experience, people who want to go off road do not want to go to organised sites. In Nottinghamshire, we have the desert—an organised site for driving quad bike and four-by-fours. The problem is the illegal activity that takes place in an 80-mile radius around the desert. People might dip into the legal or semi-legal site, but then they leave it.

Paddy Tipping: I agree with the substance of my hon. Friend's argument, but wish to clarify one point. The desert, which lies partly in my constituency, is in private ownership and the activities that take place there are illegal.

John Mann: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification, which shows that we should be tackling the menace even more vigorously. The police in my area have argued that areas such as the desert can be a legal magnet, which will draw people into one place. They seem to think that people will go to the area—perhaps in smaller white vans—to participate in a legal activity. However, whether the land is public or private, that argument is fallacious. People going off road do not want to participate in organised events on certain tracks; they want to go off road. Such a magnet simply attracts people into breaking the law, whether deliberately or inadvertently.

We should also consider the growth in quad bike ownership. In the constituency of the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, I saw farmers on quad bikes going about their lawful business, but many of the quad bikers in my area terrorise the community. Now, quad bikes are explicitly advertised for sale to under-seven's. They are a growing menace that requires additional action under crime and disorder legislation.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will recall that in the last Session I introduced a ten-minute Bill on this very subject. Does he agree with me that many drivers of off-road vehicles, whether quad bikes or other vehicles, get most enjoyment from their so-called sport by going when the lane is at its muddiest, and that they utterly destroy wildlife and the enjoyment of others who might want to use the lane afterwards?

John Mann: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which is exemplified by some of the websites. I have received quite a large number of hostile e-mails, some of them helpfully directing me to websites, and some of the websites I have looked at glorify the creation of such problems. For some people, though not all, the creation of particularly large—one might say spectacular—ruts in a footpath or bridleway is exactly the enjoyment that they are looking for. I walked the Pennine way last summer. As one crosses the north Yorkshire section, one sees where motorbikes have deliberately created routes that are perhaps more exciting to ride, but a great danger to a mere pedestrian, never mind a horse-rider.

Mr. Roger Williams: The hon. Gentleman's presence in my constituency and his knowledge of the problems gives me cause for concern, particularly if he was there at election time. All I can say is that his presence did not do his party much good. In promoting areas where activities such as he describes can take place legally, I was thinking not of small private areas, but of Forestry Commission land where the effect on the landscape could be hidden and the noise muffled. On state-owned land there are opportunities for motorised activities.

John Mann: I have no objection if a farmer in my constituency wishes to set up a route for people to go

[John Mann]

round on mini-bikes, larger bikes or quad bikes. If it does not disturb any of his neighbours, I am more than happy for that to take place. What I am against is specific routes that take one across an entire area—places such as Clarborough Hill farm, where the entire farm is surrounded by applications for an upgrade that would allow motorbikes to create a rat-run—a race track—around the farm. Such an unbridled increase in opportunity is the loophole that needs to be absolutely and, as others have said, immediately removed by the Government.

I have two final points to make to the Minister, who I hope will respond specifically to them. The first concerns existing applications. The Bill could get rid of future applications, but there is the problem of existing applications. As has been said, there are many thousands across the country. How does my hon. Friend intend to ensure that we are not bedevilled by the problems through any legal loophole because of existing applications?

My second question to the Minister, whom I should congratulate both on his excellent election result and on his promotion to his position, concerns the approach and correspondence of his predecessor, the present Minister for Industry and the Regions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Alun Michael), who identified the use of traffic regulation orders as a short-term measure to restrict the use of motorised vehicles, should any motorised use have been inadvertently accepted because of the loophole in the law. Will that still be relevant in the context of the proposals in the Bill, or will the Bill be sufficient to remove the future menace and the current one?

7.24 pm

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): As the new Member for Scarborough and Whitby, I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech on a subject of key importance to many of my constituents who, like me, live and work on the land. Before I do so, however, I shall respond to the comments of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) with regard to trail riding. As we heard, trail riding is often illegal and certainly takes place without the landowner's permission. It desecrates many of our rights of way, and it is rightly to be condemned.

However, the exhortation in *Trials and Motocross News* to vote Conservative was in connection with trial riding, the sport of Yorkshire hero Dougie Lampkin, which is done with the landowner's permission and is a sport that should be encouraged. The problem with that was not the use of green lanes, but the DEFRA guidelines on cross-compliance on the single farm payment. I am pleased that Ministers have seen some sense and relaxed those rules. There are still one or two outstanding issues relating to waterlogged land, where we need further clarification. Also, people who wish to practise on their own land are currently restricted to 28 days per year, so we need a little more flexibility from the Government.

I am blessed to have been elected to represent such a magnificently beautiful constituency. I am sure many right hon. and hon. Members have had occasion to visit Scarborough and Whitby. Scarborough is the classic family holiday resort, with the combination of Victorian elegance and 21st century excitement—*[Laughter.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Ellwood) has obviously been there—possibly on a Saturday night. Scarborough is the home of the oven chip. A thousand tonnes of potatoes are processed every day, which, combined with the harvest of our sadly much depleted fishing fleet, provide the quintessential seaside fare that so many come to enjoy. Forty-five miles of magnificent countryside contain such gems as Robin Hood's Bay, Cayton and Staithes, but the jewel in the crown must be Whitby, the home port of Captain Cook, the place where Dracula made landfall, and the resort voted No. 1 weekend holiday destination by the readers of *Saga Magazine*, a publication with which, I am sure, many hon. Members and certainly many Members in another place are familiar. There is friendly rivalry between Whitby and Scarborough—the editorials in the *Whitby Gazette* invariably refer to my constituency as the Whitby and Scarborough constituency.

Recently, my constituency received national prominence as the location for Yorkshire Television's series "Heartbeat". Aidensfield is in fact Goathland, which is served by the north Yorkshire moors railway, and the railway itself features as the Hogwarts express in the Harry Potter films. Sixty per cent. of the north Yorkshire moors national park lies in my constituency, where the north Yorkshire moors railway travels.

Being such a beautiful part of the world has its downside. The average price of a house in the north Yorkshire moors national park is £235,000, well beyond the reach of many working people in the countryside.

My predecessor, Lawrie Quinn, is a railway engineer, and in the House he took particular interest in rail transport. Lawrie Quinn was the first Labour Member to represent Scarborough after nearly a century of Conservative representation. I am pleased to say that none of the name-calling and personal vitriol that sometimes characterised the national campaign spilled over into our local campaign in Scarborough and Whitby, which was carried out in the best traditions of British democracy. Lawrie Quinn was a hard-working Member of Parliament and loyal to his party. Perhaps that was his problem. On behalf of my constituents, I put on record their gratitude for all he has done over the past eight years.

Lawrie Quinn's maiden speech was on the subject of agriculture. I was a candidate in the 1997 election in Leicestershire, and I wish I had 10 bob for every time a farmer said to me in that election that farmers always do better under a Labour Government. I did not hear those comments in 2005. The Yorkshire countryside, which is often gold with fields of wheat, green with shoots or yellow with the oil-seed rape that has recently become part of our countryside, in 2005 was blue with the posters of my supporters in the countryside.

Farming has seen many changes since my family came on to our farm in north Yorkshire in 1850. In my own lifetime, we have seen deficiency payments replaced by intervention buying, which in turn was superseded by the integrated administration and control system—IACS—and set-aside. Now we have the chaotic birth of the single farm payment. In her response to Lord Haskins' report, the Secretary of State heralded the report as a less bureaucratic framework for applicants.

I wonder how many hard-pressed staff at DEFRA regional service centres would agree. Given the choice between an area-based scheme and a history-based scheme, the Secretary of State opted for both, giving us double the number of forms to fill in.

The single most exciting event on my farm in the past century was the construction of a land army hostel, which was very popular with the local lads, during the second world war. We now have a new kind of land army in the countryside: it is not made up of sturdy lasses from the west riding driving Standard Fordsons; it is a new army of bureaucrats with clipboards clutched to their chests. I know that the Bill promises to cut red tape, but having read the entry-level stewardship handbook, which relates to a scheme that natural England will administer, I know that the reverse will be the case, and I wonder how many anoraks the author of that document owns.

The entry-level scheme makes the Domesday Book look like an unambitious project. DEFRA's new Domesday Book will log every tree, ditch and hedge in the United Kingdom, but what will be the environmental gain? Shortly after I was elected, I attended a roadshow organised by DEFRA. I went incognito as a farmer and sat at the back, where I was interested to hear that under the entry-level scheme most farmers will not have to do anything that they are not already doing—other than filling in forms to qualify for the £30 per hectare payment. Surely such a scheme should produce a greater environmental gain. Farmers who attended that roadshow questioned the value of a scheme by which we fill in forms and continue to do what we are already doing in order to qualify for money.

Farmers and sportsmen have created the British countryside—I am a pro-hunting campaigner who has entered this Chamber by more conventional means than some—and the people who create the countryside environment that we enjoy need less red tape, not more, which I fear that this Bill will deliver.

7.31 pm

Mr. Lee Scott (Ilford, North) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill.

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) on his maiden speech. I pay tribute to the work done for my constituency by my Labour predecessor, Mrs. Linda Perham, who held Ilford, North from 1997 to 2005. I also mention Vivian Bendall, who was Mrs. Perham's predecessor and who held the seat as a Conservative Member for 19 years. Both of my predecessors worked tirelessly for local people, and I wish Mrs. Perham every success in the future, although that does not include success in Ilford, North.

It is a huge privilege to be elected by the people of Ilford, North and an even greater honour to represent the areas in which I have lived for most of my life. I will work hard to match the efforts of previous MPs and to serve the interests of my constituents. Some of my predecessors are hard acts to follow. Part of my constituency was previously included in the Wanstead and Woodford seat, which was represented by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) and before that by Lord Jenkin of Roding. Looking further back, that part of the seat was also represented by Sir Winston Churchill, an act that it is impossible to follow.

My constituency is composed of eight local government wards in the London borough of Redbridge in east London. Ilford, North borders the county of Essex, and it runs from Woodford Bridge and Roding in the west, through Clayhall, Fullwell and Barkingside and on to Aldborough, Fairlop and Hainault in the east. If hon. Members ever need to find my constituency, it covers most of the stations on the eastern end of the Central line.

Ilford, North is home to many licensed London black cab drivers. The M11 runs through the constituency and the A12 provides its southern boundary. It is an area from which large numbers of commuters come and through which a larger number of commuters pass, which is why projects such as Crossrail and the docklands light railway extension are vital for the area.

Ours is a diverse community made up of many different cultures and religions, and we all get along very well. I believe that we are a beacon for others to follow, and my constituency is renowned for the harmonious relationships among the people who live there.

I want to recognise the enormous value of the work undertaken by the voluntary sector in Ilford, North. Without their substantial efforts, our community would be a much poorer place, because they make a massive contribution to the quality of life of so many people. I must mention four organisations in particular, although that is not to the detriment of other organisations in the area. First, the Hainault youth action group gives hope to young people and keeps them off the streets. With its help, we have built a skate park and a cycle track, which are situated away from residential areas and which do not result in antisocial behaviour. Secondly, the Open Door project in Barkingside allows young people to visit a place where they can drop in and have a good time after school, which, again, keeps them off the streets. Thirdly, the Chahad drugs line is a centre that is open to the whole community to try to stop the blight of drugs. Finally, Redbridge victim support, which I am honoured to be part of, helps victims of crime.

Redbridge has an enviable reputation for the quality of its education service with successful schools that continue to attract large numbers of pupils from across and, indeed, outside the borough. I have the privilege of serving as chairman of governors at Clore Tikva school, and I know and recognise the immense value to a child of a first-class education.

I had the honour and the privilege to serve as cabinet member for regeneration and the community on Redbridge council from 2002 to 2005—I must admit that I did not mind relinquishing that position to enter this House. In that role, I learned the importance of listening to the views of local people and taking those views on board in setting out plans and making decisions. As Ilford, North's MP, I pledge to continue to listen to all residents' views.

During the recent general election campaign, I promised my constituents that I would hold regular open forums open to all local residents to discuss important issues that impact on Ilford, North. Two

[Mr. Lee Scott]

weeks ago, more than 150 people attended a regeneration forum, which is a sure sign that people remain interested and involved in local issues.

There are many explanations why turnout at elections is so low. My view is that we, as politicians, must give people a reason to trust us. When we make a promise, we should do all in our power to ensure that we deliver on it. We can get people to re-connect with political processes, and we must get people to re-connect with political processes.

During the election I had many visitors, including Lord Tebbit, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) and my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and his dog Spike. I want to stop a rumour here and now—Spike did not eat any of my opponents' supporters.

More than two years ago, I was selected as the prospective parliamentary candidate for Ilford, North. In that time, we produced many leaflets and local questionnaires seeking the views of and input from residents. Local people raised many issues that concern them, and crime, the health service, the congestion charge, tube fares and high taxes came up again and again, but one issue made the top three anxieties in every survey.

It may seem odd that a Member of Parliament who represents a suburban east London constituency wants to join a debate on rural affairs. Aldborough ward in Ilford, North contains farms, although I must confess that there are only two of them. However, my constituency is blessed with a number of open green spaces. Roding and Bridge wards have the Roding valley park; there is Hainault Forest country pack and Fairlop plane; Fullwell is backed by Claybury forest; and even Barkingside and Clayhall have their parks and playing fields, while the streets have a tree-lined aspect. Ilford, North has a fundamental link to many rural constituencies and to almost all urban ones. The issue that was raised most frequently by my constituents over the past two years is the threat posed to our open spaces by current planning laws.

In recent years, a great deal of new building and redevelopment has taken place in my constituency. Some of it has been sympathetically finished, reflects the character of the local area and matches the desires and needs of local people. I single out for particular praise the sensitive conversion of the old Claybury hospital buildings, which has turned them into desirable modern apartments and ensured that the magnificent buildings continue to be used, and the Newbury Central development, which includes a number of affordable homes.

Areas of green belt land and other open spaces have been built on, and blocks of flats are being shoehorned into small spaces. There are plans, which are currently with the Deputy Prime Minister, to build an all-weather racecourse with a colossal stand. My predecessor and I opposed that racecourse, which is the last thing that Ilford, North needs.

I do not want to stop progress, and we cannot stop making provision for people's changing needs, but a lot more power should be given to local views when planning permission is sought. I feel very strongly about the way in which local democracy is trampled on by current planning laws. Where is the justice in local wishes being overturned by inspectors, except in extremely rare cases of overriding national interest? Local authorities must be given powers to control their own destiny. They must be given powers to ban mobile phone masts in heavily residential areas. Local councillors are constantly blamed for decisions that are beyond their control, and councils can have costs awarded against them when locally welcomed decisions are overturned on appeal.

Implementing planning reforms would be a real step towards local democracy. We must take care of the future needs of our residents but also encourage development on brownfield sites, not on our green fields. However, we must have a definition of "brownfield" that does not include existing perfectly habitable homes and their gardens. All too often, family homes are demolished and replaced by huge blocks of flats that end up occupying the whole site. As that practice continues it destroys the local character of the area. Furthermore, these high-density developments put an undesirable and detrimental strain on the local infrastructure such as transport, hospitals and schools. The only way forward is radically to alter the balance in planning decisions. Far more weight needs to be given to the views of local residents and the decisions of local councillors on planning matters, as those people know the local area better than a visiting inspector. Planning authorities and builders must work together with community groups to ensure that we build quality homes that people can afford to live in.

Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you again for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate. I thank the people of Ilford, North for having faith in me in electing me, and I promise that I will not let them down.

7.41 pm

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this debate. I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott), with whom I share that pleasure, and I congratulate him on his speech.

I will return to the subject matter of the debate, but I know that the House will indulge me if I start on a personal note. It is a huge privilege and pleasure to represent in this House the people of Rugby and Kenilworth—a constituency whose name combines two very different towns. From the moment that William Webb Ellis picked up the football and took it down the pitch at Rugby school, the people of Rugby have demonstrated, shall I say, a certain independence of mind, and they do so very often at election time, when they tend to disregard the prevailing political winds and instead send to this House a representative who they believe will best serve their interests. I hope that I shall follow in that tradition. Rugby is a town with a proud industrial heritage. Because of its location and transport links, it is an essential hub in our national distribution network; and because it is the home of the sport that bears its name, we could certainly exploit it far more as a tourist destination.

Kenilworth, which shared a constituency for many years with the towns of Warwick and Leamington and was represented most famously by Sir Anthony Eden, is

a very different town with its own challenges—for example, the threat to its very distinct character by indiscriminate and unfettered back land development. That is a challenge that must be faced by all those in this House, and it is certainly one to which I shall address myself in the course of my time here.There is also cause to be optimistic about the future of Kenilworth. I am pleased to say that wholesale reinvigoration of the town centre is under way. Last weekend we enjoyed a very successful festival of arts, drama and music, which showed Kenilworth in its best possible light.

Since Rugby's association with Kenilworth in this place, I have been preceded by two well-regarded and well-liked former Members of this House. My predecessor-but-one was James Pawsey, who has left, if I may put it this way, some large shoes for me to fill among the very many of my constituents who fondly remember the last time that my seat was held by a Conservative. I suspect that many Members on both sides of the House also recall Jim Pawsey's time here.

I know that it is traditional on these occasions for a new Member to speak well of his immediate predecessor. I know also that that is harder for some new Members than it is for others. In my case, it is particularly easy. Andy King, my immediate predecessor, who represented this seat on the Labour Benches for the preceding eight years, was a Member of Parliament who always put his constituents' interests first, and I pay tribute to his hard work over those eight years for the constituents of Rugby and Kenilworth. On a personal note, I thank him for his grace and generosity during the course of the general election campaign, even when I know that it must have been difficult—the point at which the result was announced.

I am eager to move from my constituency's past to its future, particularly that of the substantial rural part of it that will be most affected by the Bill that we are discussing today. For example, in my constituency stand the home of the Royal Agricultural Society at Stoneleigh park, Ryton organic gardens, which is a leader in its field, and Draycote water, which is a fine example of the co-operation that can exist between private industry and the wildlife agencies. I also represent a great many farms and villages. I therefore hope that this debate will not simply be about process and structures, but about objectives and aspirations. Before we decide what types of agencies will best serve the British countryside, we must decide what we want the British countryside to be. We must not fall into the trap of regarding it as merely a theme park for those who dwell in the cities to visit at weekends, but see it as what it is—a place to live and to work.

If we are not to regard the countryside as a theme park, neither should we look at it as a museum. It is vital that the agricultural sector, and the rural economy more widely, can prosper, develop and diversify where that is appropriate. Farmers across my constituency and, I expect, across the nation take seriously their obligation to maintain the land and to sustain the beauty of our landscape. I do not accept that the conservation of our natural environment and the practice of agriculture are mutually exclusive; indeed, I would argue that they are interdependent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) observed, it is beyond doubt that farmers do not need from this place another large mountain of paperwork and extra regulation; they need support from us in carrying out the vital work that they do in caring for the countryside.

Other matters in the countryside need to be addressed: problems of rural crime and policing; the lack of adequate public transport, and the isolation that that can bring about; the absence of affordable housing in our villages; and the often overlooked but very important issue of drug abuse in rural, not just urban, areas. Those are the real problems of the countryside, and they are daunting. I hope that natural England and the commission for rural communities, if they come about as a result of this debate, will be capable of addressing those problems and will have the full support of the Government in doing so if that is their task. I look forward to the continuing debate on this subject, and I look forward also to serving my constituents and this House to the best of my ability.

7.49 pm

Mr. Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) on his maiden speech. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright), who may know that the first competitive rugby match was played between a team from his constituency and a team from mine. I am sure that that spirit of friendly competition will continue, although possibly with less physical contact.

I especially congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) on his maiden speech. I support his call for no more racecourses in Ilford. Please send the punters to Cheltenham: that will be no problem. He also set an important precedent in this debate on rural communities by stressing the importance to urban populations of rural England. Cheltenham, too, is not precisely a rural constituency, although it sits in what I would describe as probably the most beautiful countryside in England, nestling as it does on the edge of the Cotswold hills. It is important to note, however, that there are green spaces on the fringes of Cheltenham. The Countryside Agency, which is based in my constituency, stresses that 10 per cent. of the United Kingdom's land area is urban fringe, and that 50 per cent. of all visits to the countryside are made within five minutes of people's homes. Both rural and urban green spaces are important to people in towns.

I join the hon. Members for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) and for Salisbury (Robert Key) in paying tribute to the work of the Countryside Agency, which has extremely skilled staff. If Ministers are looking for somewhere to locate the headquarters of either of their new quangos, I offer Cheltenham as the best possible location. After all, one would not want the headquarters to be too close to one's own office; that might raise suggestions of partiality. The agency, however, was a little premature in releasing its 10-year strategy in 2001. As with a few other quangos, the Government managed to set it up and abolish it in a remarkably short time. I hope that the new agencies will have a longer shelf life than the Countryside Agency in its current form. Like other Members, I fear that they may not have the same clear, independent remit as some of their predecessors and will not enjoy their specific terms of reference. I fear that the objectives of those predecessors may be diluted in these new super-agencies.

[Mr. Martin Horwood]

The Secretary of State said that she wanted an independent rural advocate, adviser and watchdog, which would also be responsible for ensuring that Government policy made a difference. The two requirements strike me as somewhat incompatible: either the body will serve Government policy, or it will be an independent watchdog. Certainly I see nothing in chapter 2, relating to the commission for rural communities, that establishes it as an independent advocate, adviser and watchdog. That was, in part, the Countryside Agency's role, and—I am sure that the hon. Member for Ilford, North agrees with this—it made the point that the countryside was not there just for those in rural communities. It seems that the new commission will serve only the interests of those people, whereas the agency's role was explicitly to serve those who visited the countryside. It valued the contribution that the countryside could make to them.

I want to say a little about decentralisation and partnership. The Secretary of State said that she wanted to reduce bureaucracy, and the Haskins report praised the corporate example, saying that responsibility for delivery should be allocated

"to those who are most competent and best placed to influence things"

—in other words, to those on the front line. Commenting on the Bill, however, the Countryside Agency identified problems in the roles and responsibilities being allocated, particularly those involving regional development agencies. It said that the roles and responsibilities of regional and sub-regional bodies needed serious clarification and that time was needed for those bodies to adapt. It said that there was

"a risk of a hiatus, that much good work will be lost and that rural areas may suffer during this implementation period."

My worry is that the countryside may suffer even more after implementation, because of the increased role of the regional development agencies. That is the way in which regional government seems to be developing under the present Administration. In London and Scotland, elected assemblies have taken powers down from Whitehall. I fear that, as has happened in the south-west, an agglomeration of unelected regional bodies will take powers up from local councils. We have the apparatus of the South West regional development agency, the South West regional assembly and the Government office for the south-west, which constitute a great concentration of power and currently act as bully boys for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister—if he needs bully boys—in supporting the plans for unsustainable development around Cheltenham and Gloucester, using as a starting point a document that looks green but is not. I have a copy here.

Only last week, hundreds packed a public meeting in my constituency to object to the development of urban fringe green spaces near the community of Leckhampton, which is in both my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). There was huge opposition to that development. Tewkesbury borough council, which had initially given permission for it, had been bounced into it by the Government office of the south-west, acting on the instructions of the Deputy Prime Minister. Because the green space in question is so close to an urban area, it is not green belt and does not enjoy the same protection, but it is nevertheless of distinct and beautiful rural character, and all the more valuable for being on the fringe of an urban area.

If the Bill supports the defence of green land and green spaces on the fringes of towns, it will have my support, and I will join the many bodies, such as the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, that have given it broad support. I cannot support the Conservative amendment, because it strikes me as factually wrong. It says that no priority is given to the protection of the natural environment, although the first priority of natural England is the promotion of nature conservation and the protection of biodiversity and the second is the conservation and enhancement of the landscape. Those are objectives with which I agree, but I hope that the Bill will be improved in Committee and in its implementation, to ensure that my concerns are addressed.

7.56 pm

Mrs. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is an immense honour for me to give my maiden speech today. I pay tribute to all the thoughtful and constructive contributions that we have heard so far, including that of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Horwood). I am particularly pleased to follow the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill). It was appropriate that he chose a debate on the environment, because he has a distinguished record on environmental matters. He served his constituency and his country very well in the European Parliament for five years.

It gives me great pleasure to follow the long-standing convention for maiden speeches and ask the House to reflect for a few minutes on the work of Sir Sydney Chapman, my predecessor. For over a quarter of a century, he represented the constituency with charm, compassion and kindness. Throughout his 26 years as the local MP, he worked assiduously for his constituents, whatever their problem and whatever their political affiliation. He had endless wells of patience. No problem was ever too small for his attention. Every constituent met with courtesy and concern when asking Sydney Chapman for help. He was also a staunch defender of the green belt and our natural environment, the subject of today's debate.

Sydney too gave his maiden speech on the environment. He was an environmentalist not only before it became fashionable, but almost before anyone had even heard of the concept. As instigator of national tree-planting year, he urged people to

"Plant a Tree in 73",

setting in train events that led to the creation of the Tree Council and many other environmental projects that continue to make a hugely valuable contribution to conservation work in Britain today. Throughout his career, Sydney planted trees at every opportunity. There can be few parliamentarians who will leave such a visible and lasting green legacy for future generations.

Sydney graced the Chamber with a warm and witty speaking style. Just one example is the occasion on which, during a debate on the work of the Church Commissioners, he famously asked whether the Church insured its property against acts of God. If it had such insurance, asked Sydney, did that not suggest a certain

lack of faith? If it did not, did that not suggest a certain lack of acumen? The House will not be surprised to hear that the Under-Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs was stumped by the question.

I know that Sydney will be sadly missed by his constituents, and I have no doubt that the House too will be a poorer place for his absence.

Let me say something about my constituency. Chipping Barnet is not, as some seem to assume, a rural retreat in the Cotswolds—it is on the northern edge of Greater London. Barnet is where the metropolis meets the countryside. Nor is it an indeterminate suburban sprawl: it is made up of a number of distinct and different villages and communities, including Totteridge, Arkley, Old Fold, Hadley, Hadley Green, Hadley Common, High Barnet, Chipping Barnet, New Barnet, East Barnet, Friern Barnet, Brunswick Park, Oakleigh Park, Woodside Park, Lyonsdown, Underhill, Southgate, New Southgate, Cockfosters, Whetstone and a narrow slice of North Finchley. My apologies to any that I have missed out.

I want to take this unique opportunity to look at the history of Chipping Barnet. The House might be worried to hear that I intend to cover about 1,000 years, but relieved to learn that I intend to do so in about four minutes. The source of the name is Anglo-Saxon: "chipping" means "market" and "barnet" means "clearing by burning", hinting at the area's woodland origins. The first real growth of the community occurred when the main road north out of London to York was routed through the area in about 1100, and the Great North road still runs through the constituency today.

Chipping Barnet took off as a settlement in 1199, when an enterprising bishop set up a market at the top of Barnet hill to provide refreshment for passing travellers. Barnet's early commercial success was not without its disadvantages, however. In 1413, for example, Barnet high street was reported to be so blocked with

"pigs, pigsties and laying of timber trunks and other filth that the transit of men was much hindered."

Sadly, Barnet still has significant traffic problems today, and it is famed for the pioneering work of the local council in removing speed humps to get the traffic flowing again.

A little known fact about Barnet is that it is a spa town. No less a person than Samuel Pepys came to take the waters there in 1664, overindulging by drinking five glasses and making himself ill in the process. And demonstrating that today's youth crime and antisocial behaviour are by no means new problems in the constituency, Barnet was the place where Dickens chose to set Oliver Twist's first meeting the Artful Dodger.

Boom time came to Barnet when it became the first coach stop from London on the journey north. At one point there were between 30 and 40 inns and nearly 1,000 horses stabled around Barnet high street. Equestrian sports remain an important leisure activity in the area although, despite the Government's new laws on 24-hour drinking, there are probably rather fewer bars and pubs in the area today than in more raucous past centuries. Back in the heyday of the coaching era, however, customers were certainly in need of rest and refreshment by the time they arrived, because Barnet hill was the highest point on the old Great North road, at 400 ft above mean sea level. The keyhole in the door of Barnet parish church is said to be on the same level as the top of St Paul's cathedral.

As the coaching trade was killed off by the railways, Barnet began a transition to its modern role of a pleasant residential suburb. The various villages that make up today's constituency expanded gradually when the mainline rail service was built through Oakleigh Park and New Barnet in 1872, and the Northern line reached its furthest extension point when High Barnet station was connected to the underground network for the first time in 1940. That marked the end of London's outward expansion, along with the creation of the green belt by the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938. It is difficult to overstate the role of transport in Barnet's development, and the chronic need for improvements to the Northern line and local rail services remains one of the most important issues for the area.

For many years, much of my constituency was in Hertfordshire, but the whole of Barnet became part of Greater London in 1965, a fact that many people still regret today. However, a significant proportion of the constituency retains its Hertfordshire postal addresses and a strong residual Hertfordshire identity. Other parts of the constituency retain their historic links to the county of Middlesex to which they once belonged.

Despite its nominal inclusion as part of our capital city, Chipping Barnet has a vast number of green spaces: parks, commons, open land, even farms and ancient woodlands, some of which may date back to the end of last ice age. Well over a third of the constituency is green belt land or metropolitan open space, and one of my top priorities as its MP will always be the preservation of the green belt and green spaces. I will fight to protect the green belt, both for the sake of our environment and to preserve the quality of life of my constituents. That is why, like my predecessor, I have chosen to make my maiden speech in a debate on the natural environment.

There can be few tasks more important for our community than the wild life, countryside and conservation that are entrusted to English Nature and which we are debating today. The new natural England body proposed in the Bill will, as the Minister explained, have a much wider remit than the conservation focus of English Nature. I believe that it is vital to ensure that the creation of natural England, with its multiple responsibilities, does not undermine or detract from that vital conservation work.

As we have heard, natural England is to be responsible both for conserving our environment and for facilitating access to it by people who wish to use our open spaces for recreation and enjoyment. Vesting these two responsibilities in one body will give rise to an immensely difficult balancing act, and to the even more difficult conflicts of interest that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) mentioned earlier. Most importantly of all, the new bodies set up by the Bill must retain their independence from the Government, as many previous speakers have said. They must be unafraid to stand up to Ministers when the need arises, as I am sure it will on a regular basis.

I should also like the Government, and the new institutions proposed by the Bill, to give much more power to local communities on conservation matters,

[Mrs. Theresa Villiers]

and to work much more closely with local people. If we are to face today's hugely important environmental challenges successfully, we need to harness the support of those in our local communities, including the members of the clubs and societies I met yesterday in my constituency who had gathered together to mark world environment day.

For many of Chipping Barnet's residents, care for the natural environment is at the heart of what it means to live there. For many, that is the main reason that they chose to make their home there. The constituency is almost entirely residential, and it is best known simply as a great place to live. The cluster of houses between Hadley Green and Hadley Common were described by Pevsner as:

"one of the most felicitous pictures of Georgian visual planning which the neighbourhood of London has to offer".

However, Barnet is perhaps best known for its rows of 1930s family homes, nestling among parks and countryside and attracting fierce loyalty from their residents.

Sadly, Barnet's suburban character is under threat from overdevelopment to a worrying extent. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott), family homes are too often being demolished and replaced by blocks of flats. I shall not make the mistake of straying too far into political subjects, but it is almost impossible to talk about Barnet without expressing concern about Whitehall's housing targets. The Government's targets and plans are placing immense pressure on our suburbs and our environment, and I believe that they seriously threaten the conservation goals that the Bill is designed to serve. For about 150 years, the suburbs have been the bedrock of social stability in this country and we jeopardise them at our peril. They are too often overlooked and undervalued.

Many people in Barnet are plagued by antisocial behaviour, yet, time and again, Barnet has been short-changed by the Government, both on police numbers and in the grant given to the local authority. The Bill covers rural communities and it is right and proper that their interests should be protected, but I call on the Minister to ensure that the Government also focus much more strongly on suburban communities and on the distinctive problems and challenges that they face.

In conclusion, one of my major political aims is to ensure that Barnet, and suburbs like it, are given the status and priority that they deserve, that they are valued as they should be, that they get the additional police officers and resources that they desperately need, and that Government housing targets do not end up destroying communities, damaging the environment and creating the sink estates of the future.

8.8 pm

John Penrose (Weston-Super-Mare) (Con): I compliment everyone who made their maiden speech earlier today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers), who has now brought the grace and talent that she has been displaying in the European Parliament to help us here in Westminster.

I also have difficult shoes to fill in trying to live up to the reputations of my predecessors as MPs for Weston-Super-Mare. My immediate predecessor was Brian Cotter, who sat on the Liberal Democrat Benches. He was caring, hard working and determined. He told me that he managed to get through about 10,000 items of constituency correspondence and case work in his two periods as MP for the constituency. His predecessor was Sir Jerry Wiggin, who served in the House for a good deal longer than a quarter of a century, and whose family's proud tradition of parliamentary service continues today: his son, my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Bill Wiggin), also serves on the Conservative Benches.

Part of my constituency has probably changed little since Sir Jerry first took his seat. A scattering of pretty Somerset villages still reaches inland from the coast through the Mendip area of outstanding natural beauty as far as Blagdon, which, as any angler here will know, also plays host to Blagdon lake, one of the most famous and long-established man-made still-water trout fisheries in the country.

Weston-Super-Mare is a cheerful, buzzing seaside town. It has a beautiful bay, donkeys on the beach, not one pier but two, and a buzzing, thriving night life. It is perhaps most famous as a destination for holidaymakers, and if I can be allowed a little pardonable exaggeration and bias in my maiden speech, if anybody here is thinking of places to take their families for the summer holidays, they should come to Weston-Super-Mare—it is wonderful and they will have a great time. The sun always shines, the sea is always clear and blue, and even if the tide goes rather a long way out into the bay, it always comes back in again later.

Members might think that acting as the parliamentary representative for such a wonderful place would be rather cushy. We have our problems, however, like everywhere else. I wish to draw everyone's attention to three or four issues that received cross-party unanimity and support in the recent general election campaign.

The first issue is drugs. We have already heard about the problems of rural drug addiction in the excellent maiden speech of the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright). The town of Weston-Super-Mare has 11 per cent. of the country's drug rehabilitation beds, most of which are excellent organisations, which are inspected under the Care Standards Act 2000 and which cause no problems. The difficulties in the town of Weston are caused by the unregistered, unlicensed drug rehabilitation treatment centres. Those places are inspected by nobody, and no one knows precisely how many there are, where they are, or how many addicts they purport to serve. The problem with them not being inspected is that no one can be sure of the quality of treatment that they provide. I am told by local professionals working in the sector that many of them provide a dubious quality of care. Clearly, that is not fair on the addicts, who are often tremendously vulnerable and deserve the best possible opportunity to break their addiction, get back into society, get jobs and contribute once again. Nor is it fair on the residents of Weston-Super-Mare, who end up having to deal with the effects when addicts are imported from other parts of the country, relapse, drop out of whatever treatment centre they were in, stay, and turn to crime to finance their habit.

It is essential that the House addresses the problem of the shortage of registered, high quality, licensed drug treatment and rehabilitation centres in this country. Without increasing those numbers—in other parts of the country, please, as Weston-Super-Mare already has more than its fair share—drug addicts will always find that they are at risk of being sent to unlicensed and therefore substandard treatment centres, and places such as Weston-Super-Mare will potentially act as a magnet for drug addicts from the rest of the country.

The second issue that Weston faces, which picks up on various points made by other Members, is associated with the planning laws. Weston has had one of the fastest rates of new housing development in western Europe over the past 20 years. The growth in the population of the town has run ahead of the amenities, facilities and infrastructure needed to turn a dormitory into a community. The effect on the local health service is perhaps most easily visible—the amount of money received by the local primary care trust is approximately £11 million a year below the Government's targets based on capitation for the area. My predecessor had contact with the Department of Health on that point, and I also intend to raise the matter.

The effect of that is straightforward—we are chronically short of GPs. Trying to find a surgery that will accept one as a patient in Weston is incredibly difficult and time-consuming. As a result, Weston's hospital, which receives excellent marks for the quality of medical care that it is able to provide, is too small to cope with the demands of the communities on which it is now called to serve. That is reflected in a growing budget problem, which is also reflected in its difficulties in satisfying the Government's waiting times targets.

Those problems are not just confined to the health sector—they also apply in the local education sector. Many local head teachers—I am a governor of a local further education college—who are trying to cope with the increased population and therefore increased number of pupils feel that they are receiving less money than their compatriots running institutions of equivalent size in other parts of the country.

Perhaps the most immediately visible example of the rapid growth with which local infrastructure is not keeping abreast is in transport. Junction 21 of the M5 is the major hub, or route, between Weston-Super-Mare and Bristol. The road network and local job creation have not kept pace with all the housing development. As a result, many people have to commute into Bristol for their jobs, rather than being able to make a much shorter journey to work to reach local factories and offices. The effect is that queues now reach back into the middle of town every weekday morning as people endeavour to get to work.

Recently, the former head of the Strategic Rail Authority came to visit Bristol, and was asked whether there were any plans to upgrade the local rail service to give people an alternative to going to work in their cars. He said that there were not, and advised Westonians to take a bus. If we are to reform the planning laws of this country, it is crucial that we make sure that infrastructure and community amenities are built in advance of new housing development, rather than behind it. That lag has caused the problems in Weston and, given current plans, is, I am afraid, likely to cause further problems unless the process is reversed.

The difficulty also knocks on into rural areas. The village of Banwell, in the middle of my constituency, suffers from appalling queues and delays every day during rush hour. It also has, on occasions, some of the worst air pollution in the whole of the south-west. The medium-term solution for the village of Banwell must be to find an alternative route for that traffic, which does not simply transfer queues and problems along the road into the neighbouring villages of Sandford, Churchill, Langford and Congresbury. In the short term, I will consult with both the local council and neighbouring authorities on how we can set up a ban on long-distance heavy goods vehicles, which currently thunder through those villages on their way to Burrington Combe. For those who do not know the area, Burrington Combe is a local beauty spot to rival nearby cheddar gorge, and is completely unsuited to having enormous lorries thundering up and down it. I shall push forward with that.

The final issue, which, significantly, all parties raised during the election campaign in Weston-Super-Mare, is council tax, and its impact on pensioners in particular. Weston-Super-Mare has for a long time been a retirement town—we have a high proportion of pensioners in our local population. They feel that the recent rapid increases in their council tax have not been matched by increases in their pensions. In fact, many of them have made the point to me that having paid into the state pension scheme for their entire lives, and having been told as it was set up and as they were paying into it that they were paying their stamp and that it was a saving scheme to create a pot of money for their retirement, it has been switched—it is no longer a saving scheme and is instead a mean-tested benefit for the poorest pensioners. They feel that they have paid into it, and that it is not a benefit but a right to which they are entitled, which they have earned, and which should not be taken away now that it is too late in their earning lives to do anything about it.

Let me finish on an upbeat note. Many Members may have read recently in the press that the donkeys on the beach at Blackpool are to get an hour off for lunch. Weston has its own donkeys on the beach. I am pleased to report that the Weston donkeys have for many years had an hour off for lunch, so clearly in this case where Weston leads, Blackpool follows. The town's motto is, "Ever forward". Perhaps in this case it is demonstrating that it is a forward-looking place. I hope to be part of contributing to that forward-looking nature here in Parliament over the next four years.

8.20 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-Super-Mare (John Penrose). My constituency abuts Blackpool, but unfortunately Blackpool's donkeys perhaps do not quite have the energy to reach my constituency. They can reflect on that point in their hour off. My hon. Friend made a notable maiden speech, speaking without notes but with passion and knowledge about his constituency. He referred to issues such as drugs, planning, housing and transport, all of which will resonate around the House, and told us of his concerns for his elderly constituents, particularly in the context of their pensions and council tax—again issues that were raised with us during the election. I welcome him to the House and congratulate him on his maiden speech.

[Mr. Michael Jack]

I hope that, before I turn to the Bill under discussion, I may refer to my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers). I enjoyed her maiden contribution. I say that because, for some years, I lived in Chipping Barnet. May I add one other date to her list of enviable anniversaries—26 May 1979 is a special day because my eldest son Edmund, who is now a doctor, was born on that day in the Victoria maternity hospital. Sadly, it is no longer there, but it has been replaced by a modern hospital.

I shall never forget, some months before Edmund was born, arriving at the hospital with my wife. We were worried whether she was pregnant or not. I said to the nurse there, "I know you deal with the end result, but we are worried about where we get started." We were directed to the family planning clinic down the road.

I was Sydney Chapman's Conservative political centre chairman. I worked very hard for him. He taught me one wonderful political bit of diplomacy. It was manifested when Edmund received a letter from Sydney congratulating him on arriving in the world and on his excellent choice of parents. I have followed the example in that letter with as many young entrants to my constituency as possible. I pass that on to my hon. Friend for her benefit. I could go through many of the other excellent maiden speeches that we have heard, but I will get on with my remarks about the Bill.

The hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) did an excellent job in chairing the sub-Committee of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that examined the Bill. I had the privilege as Chairman of the parent Committee to sit on it and to work with him through the Bill. The pre-legislative scrutiny has been much praised by Ministers. I thank them for their observations, but that scrutiny came at a rather late stage within the Committee's more comprehensive inquiry into the delivery of rural services.

It was interesting why we decided that that was a proper area to look at. We wanted to know what the real barriers were in the United Kingdom to the delivery of all those vital services, whether they be transport, health, broadband, new industry or whatever. Co-incidentally, the Government then decided to publish their draft Bill in the context of their rural strategy and invited the Committee at a fairly late stage to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny.

Inevitably, our ability to go into all the aspects of the Bill in real depth was curtailed by the time scale afforded to us and the oncoming rush of the general election. However, before Easter the Committee that was chaired by the hon. Gentleman produced its report.

I gained the impression that in its draft stage the Bill was still a work in progress. There were a lot of rough edges. There were no definitive answers to the question of the information technology systems that will be required to deliver the Bill. I note that in the Government's reply to the Committee's report, there are many references to non-executive directors on the management board for DEFRA having some knowledge about change management and IT, but no significant milestones have been published on that central element, which will be vital if the new agency is to deliver the many services more efficiently, as it claims it will.

I hope that the Minister, either in his winding-up speech or perhaps in a written statement to the House, may be able to put on record how all the problems of developing a brand new IT system for the new agency will be solved in the extremely tight time scale for the IT change programme under which we are working. In the Government's reply, they talk about the new agency being up and running by 2007. Effectively, we have a year and a half roughly to make certain that all the systems that need to be in place will be up and running.One Member who spoke earlier in the debate commented on the Rural Payments Agency. We know already of the problems that DEFRA is having in delivering that service. The same people who are to deliver on the new IT system are involved with the electronic IT innovations system in DEFRA at present, so there are some practical issues to look at.

Looking back at the evidence that the Committee took on the draft Bill, I was much taken by the contribution of the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), who was briefly in the Chamber earlier. It illustrates an interesting point about independence. The evidence that I am about to quote comes from Dr. Andy Brown, chief executive of English Nature. The hon. Gentleman put questions in his own unique way. He said:

> "With New Labour, every strategy has to be joined up, in the same way as every opportunity has to be exciting. Do you seriously believe that Defra does have a joined-up strategy for managing our land and our natural resources, as far as you can see?"

Dr. Brown, in a moment of absolute candour, which illustrates an element of independence, said:

> "I think there is some way to go."

That evidence was given at the end of 2004. What he went on to say was, I think, quite profound:

> "what I have not seen yet is something that pulls it all together in terms of land use and what we actually mean by sustainable land use and management, and that is an area where I think there is more work to be done."

When the hon. Gentleman talked about his belief that the new agency was

> "a delivery body in search of a purpose",

Dr. Moser from English Nature responded:

> "I think you are hitting the nail on the head in relation to the purpose and vision and mission of the agency."

If that is the view of the practitioners, one has to ask some questions. For example, was what happened as a result of Lord Haskins's work a consideration of how to save money by integrating various functions and then worrying about exactly what one would do after the infrastructure of the new agency was in place? That is why I say there is an element of work to do.

There were some interesting things in the rural strategy document of 2004, including a heavy concentration on the development of the rural economy and the provision of services, and there were lots of photographs of initiatives in different parts of the country that were specific to the needs of rural communities, together with wider issues—for example the availability of broadband.

One is struck by the special nature of rural Britain. It is unique at any point. The needs of individual communities are what those people who live there want.

All of that has suddenly been welded on to an agency that will have as one of its central functions the job of English Nature—that of preserving the natural environment. However, the evidence from the university of Newcastle, to which I referred the Secretary of State, showed that there had not been a properly developed strategy with any kind of decent objective analysis as to precisely what the new agency was going to be about.

As we had no final White Paper between the pre-legislative scrutiny and the appearance of the Bill, we have seen nothing to pull together the many and various views that have been put forward—for example, the conflict between the integrated agency's economic functions and its responsibility for dealing with rural deprivation and its environmental objectives in dealing with and protecting the natural environment, the major province of English Nature.

In that context, one thing that worries me is that we have not seen many case studies on how the new agency would operate in a real-world environment. As part of my preparation for the Select Committee, I had the pleasure of visiting English Nature's site of special scientific interest on the other side of the River Ribble near my constituency in Southport, where I discussed some of the real and practical problems of how we look after our SSSIs. Nothing in the Bill addresses the central issue of the lack of resources. The new agency may be able to enter into management agreements, but if the resources are not there, our SSSIs will not be brought up to the kind of standards that are required if areas of outstanding natural beauty and importance are truly to be preserved. That task lies at the heart of what the new agency is going to do.

I welcome the Under-Secretary to the Dispatch Box and I know that he has a genuine interest in these matters. For brevity's sake, I invite him to look at the evidence given by the university of Newcastle on the gaps in the current rural strategy. Newcastle had the opportunity to be objective and could see some of the failings of the new agency.

The Government produced a reply to the Select Committee report. It was somewhat late in the day, but better late than never. I have touched on the issue of the IT systems in terms of the Government reply, but I wish to mention to one or two other points that came out of it.

I asked the Secretary of State if there was any timetable for how the trick was going to be pulled off of reducing 100 rural funding schemes down to, effectively, three. There was a sort of shuffling of feet and a gracious acknowledgement that that was a challenge and a problem. One knows that the permanent secretary at DEFRA is on dodgy ground when giving evidence because he always turns to the Committee and says, "This is a challenging target." This one is indeed challenging.

The Secretary of State neatly glossed over the work of the new agency in relation not just to the regional development agencies, but to the other local structures. In rejecting Lord Haskins's original proposals, the Secretary of State effectively said that local authorities would be plugged into the delivery of rural services, rural improvements and protecting the environment via a relationship with spatial strategies to be organised by Government offices. But there was no map or linkage for how that mechanism would plug into the new agency and equally there is no mechanism or map for how that plugs into the work of the Environment Agency.

There are questions about the water framework directive and catchment areas, which, in the area of the Ribble, will become increasingly important in terms of developing a strategy for the natural environment of that remarkable ecosystem. One asks how that new arrangement fits in; the answer is, "Not very easily", and a lot of work will need to be done if the genuinely integrated agency now called natural England is to work properly. One of the tasks in Committee should be to tease out how some of those relationships will work in practice. Otherwise, I see a serious disconnect in the way that the new body is designed to operate.

That is particularly relevant to local authorities, as it is clear from the DEFRA rural strategy of 2004 that local authorities have played a crucial role, as identified by hon. Members in the debate, in the identification of local need. They have also responded, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) said, to what local people are saying. Without the resources to help local authorities replicate some of the excellent work of the Countryside Agency in developing innovative ways of providing rural services and developing rural economies, some of the aspirations of the new agency simply will not happen. At the moment, I am prepared to give the new agency the benefit of the doubt, but notwithstanding comments about its independence, the Government have much work to do to provide focus and purpose for its operation.

Finally, I want to comment on two further issues. I am wary of the reorganisation strategy that the Bill gives the Government powers to undertake, particularly in respect of the Horticultural Development Council. Such bodies are special and, in the case of the HDC, it is the only way that small growers can get certain types of research undertaken for them. The idea of simply welding things together on the ground of some loose thematic is not necessarily the best servant of improving the operation of those development councils. I am glad that widespread consultation, which is so important, will take place.

The Bill has had much welded into it, but one item is missing. I am surprised that the Minister has not taken the opportunity to use the Bill as a legislative vehicle to solve, once and for all, the legal framework for the future of the new Covent Garden Market Authority. The Select Committee undertook at least three reports. Whatever will be at the heart of the new solution for London's wholesale markets, it requires a legislative framework to be put in place that will once and for all enable DEFRA to stop operating a London wholesale fruit, vegetable and flower market, together with other activities, on that site. Even at this late stage, if there is some framework legislation that would at least give DEFRA whatever powers it needs to move, once it has solved the future of the new Covent Garden market site, I would urge the Department to take the opportunity of bolting it into the Bill.

8.38 pm

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make my maiden speech in today's

[Mr. Mark Lancaster]

debate. First, I offer my congratulations to other Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I have certainly learned more today about this great country of ours than I ever did in my A-level geography, and I hope to add to that common knowledge now by convincing people that there is more to Milton Keynes than concrete cows and roundabouts.

While the majority of my electorate in North-East Milton Keynes live in the city, I also represent a large rural community in north Buckinghamshire, and I am glad to have this opportunity to draw the House's attention to its concerns. As is the custom with maiden speeches—though, frankly, I would do so even if it were not—I consider it absolutely right to pay tribute to my predecessor, the Labour Member, Brian White. Although Brian and I often disagreed on issues of policy, I genuinely acknowledge that Brian was a first-rate constituency Member of Parliament, who served his constituents well. On his own admission, Brian was as surprised as anyone to have been returned in the 1997 general election by just 240 votes. Thanks to his dedication to the people of Milton Keynes, he managed to increase his majority to nearly 2,000 in the 2001 general election. I must confess that, seeing the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) tonight without my glasses on, I wondered whether Brian White had been returned again in this Parliament. I am grateful that, in fact, he has not been.

Brian White was one of only three Labour Members to have served the constituency of North-East Milton Keynes in modern times. When one considers that the first was Aidan Crawley, who was elected shortly after the war, but subsequently crossed the Floor of the House, and the second was the notorious late Robert Maxwell, it would be fair to say that Brian was by far the least controversial. I have little doubt that the election result this time had little to do with Brian White and was a reflection not on him as a Member of Parliament but on the Government. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I say only that I hope to emulate his dedication to the people of North-East Milton Keynes.

I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the first Conservative Member of Parliament for North-East Milton Keynes, Peter Butler, who served the constituency from 1992 to 1997. Peter has not enjoyed the most robust of health over the past year, but I am sure that the many right hon. and hon. Members who served with him in that Parliament will be delighted to hear that he is making a good recovery. I am honoured to have been elected as the Member of Parliament for North-East Milton Keynes and I look forward to serving the diverse community that it includes.

Many Members will have travelled through the constituency as they have driven up and down the M1. To the south and west of the motorway, we have some of the newest new town communities, together with the villages of Wavendon and Woburn Sands. Walton Park is the home of the Open university—an establishment in which all Members can rightly take some pride. The Open university has brought educational opportunity to millions of people across the United Kingdom. From the 20,000 students who enrolled in 1971, the number whom it educates has risen to more than 200,000 every year, and its innovative approach to distance learning leads the world. It brings the highest quality university education to learners in every constituency in the land and in that sense it is both the local and national university to every Member of this House. Now is not the time to raise the Open university's unique status as the only university to have been overlooked in the Government's recent higher education review, but I am sure that that subject will fill my postbag and, indeed, my correspondence with Ministers.

Central Milton Keynes, with its excellent shopping centre, snow dome, theatre district and cinemas, lies just within the constituency boundary, and I look forward later this month to attending a ceremony on the summer solstice to mark the rising of the sun as its rays shine down the aptly named Midsummer boulevard to strike the city's foundation stone. Coming so soon after my own election, my friends have drawn a slightly humorous parallel between that and the Prime Minister's famous words in 1997 that a new day was dawning. A new political day has dawned in North-East Milton Keynes, but I am sure that hon. Members will be pleased to hear that I sense that my primary duty is to serve rather than amuse my constituents.

Milton Keynes is of course a modern city, but it is also a constituency of great history. To the north of the motorway, we have rural north Buckinghamshire, including the town of Newport Pagnell, which is the home of Aston Martin cars. It is also the home of my new constituency office. I hope that Members will share my amusement on discovering on my first visit to the office that it was named after its 18th century owner. There, above my nice Conservative blue door, was a name plaque, declaring to all that the building was called Blair house. What to do? It was a dilemma that perhaps many Members on both sides of the House share: should Mr. Blair stay or should he go? I am sure that Members will be impressed by the fact that I made a quick decision, and with the aid of a screwdriver and just two minutes of my time, Mr. Blair disappeared.

Also in the north of the constituency is the town of Olney. It is the town in which I live and it has been home to the famous pancake race since 1445. Olney also boasts of having been the home not only of the poet William Cowper but of the slave trader turned parish priest, John Newton, who is perhaps most famous now as the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace".

Given that this year marks the 400th anniversary of the gunpowder plot, I ought to single out a village in my constituency for special mention. The plotters stayed the night in Gayhurst before making their final, fateful trip to this place in November 1605. To continue the explosive theme, I believe that I am the first ever firework manufacturer to be elected to Parliament. I confess that many of my friends have questioned my sanity in becoming a Member of Parliament, but—as my mother was always quick to point out—when one has a firework-making vicar as a father, one is bound to have some strange ideas.

I hope to earn a reputation as someone who brings solutions as well as problems to the Chamber. To start as I mean to go on, I should offer some reassurance to Members who may be nervous about having a pyrotechnician in the House. They may be relieved to hear that I continue to serve as a bomb disposal officer in the Territorial Army.

Leaving explosives aside, I have a genuine passion to serve Milton Keynes in this wonderful Parliament of ours. Milton Keynes is a success story. It is a vibrant, can-do place. It is a fantastic place to live, but its citizens have grave concerns about the expansion plans proposed in the Deputy Prime Minister's so-called sustainable communities plan. Our rural communities and green fields are threatened, and that was by far the biggest single local issue in the election campaign. Most people in Milton Keynes accept that the city will grow over time and they do not have a nimby attitude. However, much concern is felt about the type of expansion planned and the manner in which it has been imposed. Local people resent the fact that the expansion plans have been set by central and regional government, and that there is little, if any, meaningful local consultation and ownership of the expansion agenda. That applies to the overall size, location and type of housing developments, as well as the specific local decisions.

People are deeply concerned about the lack of infrastructure to support the additional housing. The small print of the documents from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister contains only the vaguest of promises of additional transport links, health care and educational capacity, as well as the panoply of other services that communities need to thrive. Milton Keynes has an acute shortage of dentists and the general hospital struggles to cope with the present population, let alone thousands more. While our grid road system works—even if the Deputy Prime Minister, in a local radio interview, admitted that he did not understand it—there are no plans to extend it.

Those are just some of the basic services that directly impact on people's quality of life. My approach is simple—i before e, or infrastructure before expansion. In the election campaign, a succession of Ministers visited Milton Keynes to assure us that the infrastructure will be delivered. I hope that they will come back soon to make good those promises. Our city motto is "By knowledge, design and understanding". By following those principles, Milton Keynes has grown into the successful and vibrant city that it is today. Its success can continue, if it is allowed to grow organically, with popular local support and properly thought-through planning. If the expansion is too great or not properly planned, we will permanently lose the basic ingredients of success. I look forward to championing the needs of my constituents in those and many other areas and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today.

8.48 pm

Ms Angela C. Smith (Sheffield, Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster) on his maiden speech and concur with his comments about the Open university. That was an achievement of a previous Labour Government and Prime Minister, and it is an institution that we all admire and support.

I have heard many comments in this debate about the beauty of our natural environment. In particular, I noted the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Tom Levitt), who said that his constituency is the most beautiful in the country. I have strong sympathy with those remarks, as I have a tiny bit of the High Peak in my constituency. I would even go as far as saying that the Peak district national park is definitely the most beautiful in England.

Other hon. Members have pointed out that natural England is supported by many voluntary sector organisations, including the Woodland Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Trust. I agree that natural England has the potential to be a powerful driver in ensuring that we secure the future of a living, breathing countryside that evolves successfully and sustainably.

I say that because the history of land management in our country is one of compromise, of reconciling the interests of those who live and work in the countryside with the need to conserve and protect it. That principle has been even further developed and applied by the voluntary sector, by bodies such as the RSPB, the Woodland Trust and the National Trust, all of whom have pursued policies designed to ensure that our rural areas continue to thrive and prosper in a sustainable manner. Those of us who are members of those organisations know that they support and develop farming enterprises as well as conservation programmes to ensure the future of our countryside.

The role of the voluntary sector must be acknowledged as critical in ensuring a pragmatic approach to reconciling access and conservation interests. Voluntary organisations are well practised in doing that and the powers and remit of natural England should not only recognise its independent status but also ensure that there is a clear role for the voluntary sector in advancing the interests of those who live in, work in and enjoy our rural areas.

I strongly support the commission for rural communities. It has already been said that the protection of rural post offices is critical for people who live in those areas. In a constituency such as Sheffield, Hillsborough, the commission would be very much involved in planning issues. The area is mixed; it is rural in parts, but also has many former industrial sites. It is vital that the commission defends the planning interests of those areas for the people who live in them to ensure that the redevelopment of industrial sites is sympathetic to the sustainable principles entrenched in the Bill.

Access to schools is not merely about keeping schools open, but ensuring that the new generation of secondary schools can exploit the growing capabilities of IT and develop virtual learning environments. The development of specialist status and raising standards in our classrooms are also important. Building schools for the future and the development of the secondary sector in particular are important in rural areas and the commission should be pursuing those issues.

Child care and services for children are critical in rural areas. Often, there are not enough children in villages to trigger the development of new facilities. The challenge is to ensure that not only local authorities but the commission represent the interests of parents and children living in such communities. We must develop the innovatory outreach services that have already been set up in areas such as Sheffield so that parents who need support in bringing up their children or who need child care can access services that are more often found in urban areas.

[Ms Angela C. Smith]

Public transport has been mentioned, especially bus services. In my constituency, there is an old railway line, part of the Woodhead line, which is closed to passengers and available only for the Corus steelworks at Stocksbridge. The challenge is to get that line reopened for passengers and a small charitable body has already been formed for that purpose. I look forward to a commission that will support such bodies so that the line can be reopened. I hope that it will work with the regional development agency to ensure that the funding is in place.

Part 6 refers to four-wheel drives, of which we have heard much today. It would be enormously helpful if we could develop a consensus in the House on tackling the serious threat such vehicles pose to the sustainability of many of our ancient bridleways. I refer especially to the old Roman road between Glossop and Hope, which is actually in the High Peak constituency, and which suffers badly due to the use of four-wheel drives. Not long ago, I was going from the road to the woodland, and was confronted by a convoy of five four-wheel drives coming up from the main road to the hills.

A beautiful area, such as the Peak district, is being despoiled by Land Rovers and scrambling bikes. The state of that road is now almost beyond repair. It is almost unusable by walkers, and in winter when the deep ruts caused by those bikes and four-wheel-drives are filled with rainwater, it is unusable. Walkers are forced off the path and therefore cause further environmental damage by creating new paths alongside the old Roman road. The use of bridleways by four-wheel drives is incompatible with concepts of conservation and sustainability, and the issue is therefore an important focus for the Bill.

I welcome the Bill and its general direction in strengthening the delivery of services for rural areas and in making the many voices of the countryside heard more strongly in future.

8.55 pm

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I pay tribute to hon. Members for their witty, erudite and polished maiden speeches. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster), as my family originate from Newport Pagnell. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me for being slightly unkind: it occurred to me while waiting many hours to speak that, in particular, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) certainly had a magnificent opportunity to avail himself of the right to gas—he certainly did.

It is with gratitude that I thank the people of Peterborough for electing me to the House. It is with a mixture of pride and humility that I speak as the newly elected Member for Peterborough—a city that has elected Members to the House since 1529. Indeed, hon. Members will know that the city holds a record for being one of the most marginal parliamentary constituencies in the country. One of my esteemed predecessors, the late Lord Harmar-Nichols, previously Sir Harmar Nicholls, recorded majorities variously of 144, 137, 22 and just three votes in general elections between 1950 and 1974. Electorally, he was always living dangerously, and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), will know how he feels, given his constituency.

Those who have followed the fortunes of Peterborough United football club over the past few months can be reassured that there was one blue team in Peterborough that was not relegated this season, and I am pleased about that.

We have always had rumbustious general elections in Peterborough. In 1895, baton-wielding police were called to the hustings to break up the kerfuffle. In 1906, the victorious Liberal candidate, George Greenwood, had his battlebus, or carriage, stolen and set alight as it was dragged across the city.

One of the voters at the next general election may be my immediate predecessor, Mrs. Helen Clark. As hon. Members will know, shortly after losing her seat at last month's general election, she announced her defection from the Labour party, after more than 20 years, to my party. It is customary to pay tribute to one's predecessor in a maiden speech, and I compliment her on her good sense.

I am proud of my constituency. At its heart is an ancient cathedral, one of the finest mediaeval cathedrals in Europe, surrounded by cutting-edge industries, such as the engineering companies Peter Brotherhood and Perkins Engines. Their names are synonymous with craftsmanship and British quality. The railways, too, provided employment for hundreds of local families over the past 150 years, particularly in the New England area of my constituency, which has been represented on the city council since 1954 by my friend, Councillor Charles Swift, OBE, who represents everything that is best about local government service and civic duty. In addition, major blue-chip companies, such as Thomas Cook and Freemans Catalogues, have also been attracted to the city owing to its good transport links.

Peterborough is a very diverse constituency. I believe that I represent a larger number of Muslim constituents than any Member on the Opposition side of the House. The Government's asylum policy notwithstanding, we in Peterborough have an admirable record of racial tolerance, as people from many different faiths and ethnic groups peaceably live and work alongside each other.

It is appropriate that I join the debate on this Bill because, although I represent a wholly urban constituency, I have an interest in that English Nature is based in my constituency. My two concerns are that the jobs of the excellent work force at English Nature are protected and, more important, that the independence of that body is carried forward to the new organisation. In that regard, I agree in some respects with the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), who talks at least some good sense on the basis that, like me, he is a graduate of Royal Holloway college. I am concerned about the organisation's independence and it is worth quoting Friends of the Earth. Conservative Members occasionally quote Friends of the Earth, which, as the hon. Gentleman said, has been a thorn in the Government's side. Its concern is that the new

integrated agency will not be able to be critical of the Government and will lack English Nature's traditional independence. Friends of the Earth say that

"it is feared that the clear and focused remit of EN to conserve biodiversity (the diversity of England's wildlife species and habitats) will be lost as the new integrated body will embrace a far wider set of issues from payments to farmers, diversifying the rural economy and access to the countryside."

Peterborough is going forward. Over the next few months and years, through an urban regeneration company, the city council intends to rejuvenate and regenerate the city centre and boost our local secondary school centre with a major building programme. A city the size and stature of Peterborough should have a university; at the moment, it does not. While I am here, I intend to do what I can to rectify the position.

Of course, it is the people of Peterborough who make the city such a good place in which to live and work. There is a warm community spirit and the generous nature of local residents is demonstrated by the success of three nationally renowned charities based in the city: ASBAH—the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus; Deafblind UK; and the National Kidney Research Fund. It is fitting that I should pay tribute to the truly inspirational individuals who work tirelessly and selflessly on behalf of people less fortunate than most of us and whom it has been my privilege to meet over the past five years: John and Rosie Sandall, who have spent the past 16 years raising money for their kitchen-table charity for funds for the children of Chernobyl; Carol Bailey and her team at the Peterborough citadel of the Salvation Army, who do so much for the less fortunate people in the North ward; Paula Thacker of PHAB—Physically Handicapped, Able Bodied; Linda Dalton and the volunteer team at the Sue Ryder hospice at Thorpe Hall; and Graham Hicks, who raises money for Deafblind UK and who, in June 2003, became the first man to jet ski from Britain to Holland and back, despite being deaf and blind. I salute those charity champions of my community.

I won the trust of the people of Peterborough by tackling various local issues and promising them that I would do all that I can to improve the quality of their lives. I beg the House's indulgence to discuss an issue that came up on the doorsteps in Werrington, Eastgate and Millfield and across the city at the recent general election. Crime is that major problem in my city. On any one Saturday evening, there can be as few as 14 police officers on the streets of Peterborough—a city of 169,000 people.

As the son and brother of policemen, I am only too aware of the problems faced by our police officers and the heartache suffered by the victims of crime. Over the past four years, the northern division of Cambridgeshire police has recorded a rise of 120 per cent. in violent crime and 44 per cent. in robbery. In addition, binge drinking, vandalism and yobbish behaviour are affecting the quality of life of residents in all parts of the city—black or white, rich or poor and young or old.

Cambridgeshire is still in the bottom 10 of the worst-funded police authorities in England and Wales, and Peterborough lacks sufficient police officers on the street to make a significant and meaningful impact on crime and disorder.

There are any number of gimmicks and talking shops, such as a local strategic partnership, crime and disorder reduction partnerships and community safety plans. In short, we have top-down diktats from the Home Office, which will fail to ameliorate the corrosive nature of public cynicism and frustration that undermine the criminal justice system.

Senior police officers and local police authorities, including my own in Cambridgeshire, are accountable more to the Home Office than to local residents and local taxpayers. This cannot be right. I shall use my influence in the House to argue for greater localism and greater accountability. I believe that elected police chiefs are a step towards restoring the link between those who keep the Queen's peace and those who pay for it. The move will go some way towards restoring my constituents' faith in the criminal justice system and the rule of law.

I am mindful of the fact that all political power is merely a leasehold held on trust and that it can be revoked at any time. The people of Peterborough put their trust in me on 5 May. I promised not to let them down and I promised also to be their ambassador in this place. Tonight, I reiterate that promise.

9.7 pm

Mr. Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr. Jackson) on his maiden speech. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech.

It is a great honour to have been elected the Member for Arundel and South Downs. I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends will understand me when I say that it came as something of a surprise to me to be selected. Two months ago I had hardly thought that I would be in the position that I am now. I had then been enjoying the luxury of running a think tank and conducting radical thinking. That luxury is no longer available to me. I had to spend much of the election campaign looking carefully under tables at village hall meetings to check that bugs had not been placed by the agents of the previous Government and worrying that I might commit some dreadful infelicity in arguing, for instance, for lower taxes.

I have been greatly helped since arriving in this place by the kindness of the Opposition Whips, who looked after new Members with a great deal of attention. We were given the opportunity of a two-day induction course. We were assisted by the fact that each of us was required to wear a badge bearing our name, with our constituency written underneath. We were shaking hands, introducing ourselves and congratulating one another on our success. Someone came up to me and congratulated me. His name, I think, was James Baring. He had Douglas and Gordon written on his badge. I said, "Congratulations to you, too. I had not realised that we had won an additional seat in Scotland". It turned out that it was Douglas and Gordon, the estate agents. I had already made the first of many mistakes, I am sure, as a new Member.

It is right for me to pay tribute to my predecessor, Howard Flight. He was the inaugural Member for Arundel and South Downs, a seat that was newly created in 1997 when he first fought it. I am sad about the circumstances in which Howard had to resign from the seat, but I pay great tribute to the work that he did as a well-regarded constituency Member. He was

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assiduous in the attention he gave to his constituency and in his work for my party—work that was shared by his wife Christabel. I hope that my party will find a continuing role for Howard in the future.

I can well understand Howard's dismay at being unable to continue to represent such a beautiful constituency. I say with some care, given that I know that some of my hon. Friends present also represent beautiful constituencies, that Arundel and South Downs must be one of the most beautiful constituencies in England. Thirty miles broad—twice the size of the Isle of Wight—it can take almost an hour to drive from one side to the other. It famously contains the town of Arundel and Arundel castle, where indisputably the most beautiful cricket ground in England is found. Each year, a visiting touring side plays the Duke of Norfolk's XI or another side constructed to give the tourists their first game. This Thursday, we look forward to the visit by Australia, which is to play its first game of the tour at Arundel. I hope that a member of the Professional Cricketers' Association Masters XI will replicate the success of my great-grandfather, who, when playing for the Duke of Norfolk's XI against Sussex at Arundel, took five wickets for seven runs. For those who might not know much about cricket, let me emphasise that five wickets for seven runs is quite an achievement. If we can begin with that sort of performance against Australia, it will stand us in good stead for a great Ashes victory.

As is clear from its name, my constituency contains a great part of the south downs, described by the naturalist Hudson as

"a land of wild nature and wild prospects."

Half of the constituency is covered by an area of outstanding natural beauty. The Bill's aims of protecting the environment and rural communities are therefore highly relevant, but I suspect that my constituents will greet many of its provisions with hollow laughter. During the election campaign, the local issue most prevalent on the doorstep was that of countryside development. People are enormously concerned about the proposals for house building in West Sussex, which is an outstandingly beautiful part of England, and the impact that that development will have in the area near the south downs.

It is significant that the proposals for 46,500 houses in West Sussex alone—more than 100,000 in the south-east—are, in essence, central Government diktat. Local people feel disfranchised—they feel that they have no say in whether the development should go ahead. The local authorities oppose it, as do the overwhelming number of local people, yet the decisions have been handed down from the Secretary of State and through the unelected South East England regional assembly. When I tell my constituents that I spoke on Second Reading of a Bill to protect the natural environment that the Government introduced early in the new Parliament, they will wonder why that Bill does nothing to arrest the house-building proposals about which they are concerned and over which they have no say.

The second reason why I believe that the Bill will be met with hollow laughter in my constituency is that it talks about protecting rural communities at a time when the natural communities that have shaped my part of West Sussex for centuries are threatened and some have been lost. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) said, farming is enduring a period of great change and difficulty, and that difficulty is exacerbated by the increasing regulation confronting the industry. It is difficult to stand in the way of the changes that farming is experiencing, but we could make it easier on farmers by introducing less of the kind of legislation that the Bill contains.

I cannot avoid introducing a note of controversy about a more malevolent attack on natural communities, which may not affect the constituencies of some Labour Members or even of some of my hon. Friends, but does affect mine. I refer to the ban on hunting, which was introduced in the last Session. I have a number of packs of hounds in my constituency. The impact of that legislation, irrespective of its other merits—I happen to think that it had no merits—is devastating on the natural rural communities that have existed for hundreds of years in that part of the world and which bind rural people together. It behoves us to reflect whether it is possible to legislate, as the Bill sets out to do, to build or support communities. I believe that it is not possible to legislate in that way. What we can do is legislate in a way that undermines such communities or even destroys them.

Another example that I could give was well made by the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), whose constituency abuts mine. He spoke about the impact of licensing regulation on shops, village halls and so on, where people wish to conduct events. Those absurd licensing regulations result in small bodies having to spend hundreds of pounds and go through the great bureaucratic difficulty of applying for licences simply in order to sell a small amount of alcohol at a quiet rural event or daily to quiet rural customers. Excessive legislation can create great difficulties for local communities. One of the best things that we can do for such communities is to lift the regulatory burden and to a large extent leave them alone.

I apply the same test to the part of the Bill relating to national parks. In my constituency there is a controversial proposal to create a national park in the south downs. The proposal has attractions and one can understand why people are drawn towards it, not least by the desire to protect the special rural environment there, yet if the Government are part of the answer to protecting the beautiful south downs, I wonder whether the designation of the park is a good thing.

I suspect that that will result in more regulation in the countryside and the substitution of an only partly elected body in the form of the national park authority, which will take planning decisions, whereas at present elected local authorities take such decisions, allowing people to feel that they have some kind of say over them. It will inevitably result in an increase in tourism in the area, with all the impact that that may have on the local environment. It may introduce conflict between local people and the park authority, such as I saw when I lived in a national park in Northumberland for three years.

The Bill has antecedents. The rural White Paper in November 2000 promised to deliver high-quality services in rural areas. Today, four and a half years later, the Secretary of State said that the Bill would radically transform rural services. I wonder what happened in between. Rural services in my constituency are under

great pressure. Part of the difficulty is the funding settlement given to West Sussex. Although it is one of the most efficient councils, it has one of the worse settlements of any council of its kind. Resources have been taken away from it, the more efficiently it has performed.

The Bill would result in a considerable centralisation of the provision of services, which I no longer believe is viable in the modern world. It does not yield the results and the improvement in services that the public have a right to expect. That centralisation can manifest itself in extraordinary forms. During the election campaign I visited a doctor's surgery in the constituency, where a patient had offered to change a light bulb in the surgery. His manager told him that he could not change the light bulb and that someone had to be sent up from the relevant authority in Brighton to change it in accordance with NHS rules.

Throughout the election campaign, my concern was that in seeking to talk to people about how services might improve, there seemed to be a great disconnect between what the Conservative party and, indeed, the Government were offering and what people were willing to believe might happen as a result of the election of either one of us.

Another issue was antisocial behaviour in villages in my constituency. Such behaviour started in a minor way, but it greatly irritates local people and it is becoming a problem. All parties made promises about dealing with antisocial behaviour, but my constituents and others do not believe that we can produce what they want to see—the reintroduction of local policemen in the villages. We have had some success with community support officers, but there was a great disconnect between what we were promising and local people's expectations. That disconnect exists because local people sense that their ability to influence such decisions has been taken so far away from them that it is very unlikely that the changes that we were promising will be secured.

Today, the Leader of the House said that one reason why he thinks it so important to re-engage with voters is that the public understand that services are improving, but they do not realise that that is all to the Government's credit. That is not a reason to seek to re-engage with our voters. Even if it were true that services are improving—I do not believe that they are—there is the much more profound problem of the gap between what political parties say that they can do and what can be delivered for local people and, in my case, rural communities on the ground.

We have taken away power from local authorities and decision making from local people. Having centralised those powers, however, we cannot deliver the improvements to services that people seek. The Bill falls into that trap and is, in a sense, the old politics—it has 99 clauses, 99 pages and 12 schedules, but it offers familiar solutions that will not effect the radical transformation promised by the Secretary of State. It introduces a new quango, which is—surprise, surprise—mostly unaccountable. In the spirit of the modern age, the quango is branded as "natural", as though it were a yoghurt, and its very creation will take more powers away from local authorities.

We have not learned the lessons from the public's rejection of the North East Assembly. In my part of the world, the regional assembly continues to make decisions on behalf of local people, although it is wholly unelected. We are not rapidly learning the lessons from the rejection of the European constitution by the peoples of Europe, which shows the disconnect between the public and politicians.

It is time for a new politics that brings decisions closer to people, makes institutions such as the one created by the Bill more accountable, regains power for local authorities and puts choice and control in the hands of individuals. That is the only way in which we can generate a better countryside, better communities and better services, especially for the disadvantaged. Instead of that, we have heard bold claims about a radical transformation that will simply not be met.

9.24 pm

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I compliment the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Herbert) on his maiden speech. The pride that he takes in his constituency and his determination to safeguard its beauty will stand him in good stead both there and in this House, and we look forward to hearing more from him.

I want to make a number of points in the short time available. First, I remind the Minister and the House that the Bill covers England and Wales but also mentions Scotland and Northern Ireland. Although most of the debate has centred on natural England, the Bill will affect Wales. Those of us who believe that our role in this House is at least partly to nurture the devolution settlement and ensure that the Welsh Assembly grows in confidence and in its ability to work for the Welsh people look at such legislation to see whether it is moulded in a way that will contribute to that. The Government do not get 10 out of 10 as far as this Bill is concerned, because we would look for more enabling powers for the Welsh Assembly. Although I cannot go into detail now, several clauses say that the Welsh Assembly "must" do something. We certainly have confidence that the Welsh Assembly will do the best for the Welsh people, but it would be better if the Government had similar confidence and used the word "may".

Part 2 covers the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, where Wales is represented by the chairman of the Countryside Council for Wales and one other member. Five other members are to be appointed. I know that the Minister will say, "Yes, of course we would consult the Welsh Assembly on that", but it would give us more confidence if that was stipulated in the Bill.

As for the inland waterways advisory council, the Secretary of State will appoint its chairman in consultation with Scottish Ministers, but what about consultation with the Welsh Assembly as well? Two Scottish members are to be appointed. A little more openness and commitment to devolution would not go astray. The Welsh Assembly is of course a child of the Labour Government and the more they nurture and encourage it, the better.

It would be helpful if all the Members who made maiden speeches and prayed in aid bits of the national parks in their constituencies could join the all-party

[Mr. Roger Williams]

group on national parks. Several of us have been campaigning for direct elections in respect of national parks. That may be a radical and revolutionary concept in terms of this country's democracy, but I am sure that it would do a lot of good. When I was chairman of Brecon Beacons national park, I introduced a traffic regulation order that safeguarded a very ancient right of way from destruction by various types of vehicles. It would be a real advance if national parks could introduce traffic regulation orders themselves instead of having to go through the county councils. Perhaps the Minister would consider putting that in the Bill.

I welcome clause 58, which removes the duty on national parks to promote social and economic development but without spending any money, which has always seemed impossible to me.

That brings me to rights of way. In my constituency, the use of motor vehicles in recreation is an important part of the local economy. Some very responsible people are engaged in that. The retired bank manager who wants to travel from Rhayader to Tregaron and back again for his Saturday afternoon leaves no mark of the fact that he has made that journey—it is the irresponsible people whom we should be concerned about. I will support the provisions in the Bill, but we must make an accommodation to ensure that those people who are engaged in responsible use of motor vehicles in the countryside can continue to enjoy that. That will benefit the local economy, as well as nature conservation.

I hope that the Minister will take on board those few remarks. I am sure that he will come back with an entirely different Bill when it goes to another place.

9.29 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate. Hearing so many great maiden speeches makes one pleased to be back in the Chamber: they were excellent speeches, brimming with enthusiasm.

I am particularly pleased to speak about the natural environment and rural communities on the day that the British Airports Authority, as it was—now BAA plc—issued its master plan to destroy at least 700 homes in the London borough of Hillingdon in connection with Heathrow. We have talked about communities; I am talking about villages that the BAA plans simply to wipe out. Although they are in the next-door constituency, Hayes and Harlington, West Drayton, near my constituency, is also affected. When we talk of communities, let us not forget that semi-rural communities exist in the London borough of Hillingdon just as they do elsewhere.

The Bill is a curate's egg, but I welcome some parts of it. Clauses 44 and 45 deal with the use of pesticides and poisons, which is a real problem. However, I feel that the Secretary of State's power to proscribe the possession of a pesticide should perhaps be broadened to reflect the danger posed by such chemicals to human health and companion animals, in line with schedule 2 of the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986.

There is a risk that the list of prohibited pesticides will always be behind the poisons favoured by those who wish to kill birds illegally. Those who abuse such chemicals will simply move to a new pesticide as their chemicals of choice are added to the list. The delay between investigations showing that another chemical is in widespread use and its inclusion in the list will allow those involved in the unlawful use of such chemicals to continue to possess them.

It is also worth considering whether the offence should apply to

"having in one's possession or control any pesticide without lawful authority or reasonable excuse".

Similar provisions in the Criminal Justice Act 1988 prohibit the possession of articles with a blade or point in a public place, but provide a defence of

"good reason or lawful authority"

under which, for example, farmers and gamekeepers may lawfully operate.

Nothing, I believe, has been said today about clause 46 and the destruction of nests outside the breeding season. I know that that is a matter of great importance to the House. The clause includes a rather limited selection of birds. White-tailed eagles do not breed in England and Wales, and there is only one golden eagle nest in England. We should examine the threat of deliberate damage to nest sites, possibly considering the barn owl, chough, hen harrier, merlin and peregrine. Perhaps we should consider the swift as well, because it has suffered a great deal.

I do not think I shall be lucky enough to be chosen to sit on the Committee, but I am sure that I shall be able to express my views to its members.

9.33 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): I congratulate all who have delivered their maiden speeches this evening. They were excellent and those Members bring great qualities to the House.

Before referring specifically to the Bill, I must declare an interest. It is included in the old Register of Members' Interests, but we have no register yet for the new Session. I own land in a national park and am a commoner in the Dartmoor national park, where I have grazing rights and rights of turbary. The Minister may not know what those are, but no doubt he will find out before his winding-up speech. I have never exercised them.

My specific concern about the Bill relates to part 6. Last year, I introduced a private Member's Bill under the ten-minute rule, the Restricted Byways Bill, although I knew that eventually the Government would produce legislation on the use of trail bikes and four-wheel drives on our bridleways and other byways in the countryside. There is a particular problem in Dorset, where trail bikers cause enormous problems.

The real problem envisaged by me and my county council—which I share with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight)—was that certain organisations would try to get in under the wire to get these bridleways and other byways approved before the legislation took effect. The commencement date set out in the Bill is not specific enough. Even I got that wrong—in my Bill, I gave too much leeway by proposing a commencement date of 1 January 2006. I now believe that the commencement could even be retrospective. If we do not have these measures in place,

the provisions of the Bill will be totally ineffective because all the organisations involved will have got in under the wire. I hope that that issue will be addressed in Committee.

9.35 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): This is an important Bill for the English and Welsh countryside, as has been made clear by the quality of today's debate and by the fact that eight of my hon. Friends elected to make their maiden speeches. That is a clear demonstration of the genuine Conservative empathy with the countryside, rather than the caricature that we are only interested in hunting. Indeed, until 9.15 this evening, the only person to have mentioned hunting in this debate was the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker).

This debate gives me the opportunity to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), and I look forward to debating the Bill with him during its further stages. We have heard a number of maiden speeches today, including that of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Horwood). I am afraid that he lost my support when he suggested that people should go to Cheltenham race course rather than to Newmarket in my constituency. We also heard eight exceptional maiden speeches from Conservative Members, all of whom bring credit to these Benches. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) clarified the distinction between trial bikes and trail bikes—there is a great difference between the two—and referred to the new land army of bureaucrats with clipboards. I understand from today's paper that he is a member of the new model army, and we look forward to his further contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) spoke with great fervour of the joy of representing the constituency in which he grew up. He spoke of the importance of local accountability and democracy and of the protection of green fields—an issue that arose again and again during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright) also mentioned it, when he referred to the damage done by bad planning decisions taken in Kenilworth. He also spoke of the need to decide what we want the countryside to be and of the interdependence of agriculture and the environment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) rightly paid tribute to Sydney Chapman—all of us across the House miss his company—and reminded us of his environmental credentials. She, too, raised the issue of the impact of development and told us that a third of her constituency consisted of green belt and open space.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-Super-Mare (John Penrose) made a lucid and fluent maiden speech about the unchanging nature of parts of his constituency. He also mentioned the problems of planning and overdevelopment in other parts of the area. His views on that were shared by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster), who illustrated that his constituency consists of more than concrete cows—it contains real countryside and real rural communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr. Jackson) rightly paid tribute to English Nature, which is based in his constituency, and showed himself to be the robust Member that we in Cambridgeshire have long known that he had the potential to be. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Herbert) used the words "kindness" and "Whips" in the same sentence, which he will probably not do for much longer. He also spoke of the problems of new housing and its impact on the countryside.

In moving our amendment, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) rightly said that we support many of the measures in the Bill. The issue of green lanes, in relation to trail riding and four-wheel-drive vehicles, has been widely rehearsed across the Chamber tonight, and it is clear that there is unanimity among everyone who has spoken, not only on the nature of the problem, but on the need to get on with sorting it out quickly, as the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) said. I also endorse everything that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) has just said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Robert Key) made the point that many of the people concerned want mud to make their journeys more exciting. In relation to the Human Rights Act 1998 getting in the way of this legislation, I find it difficult to accept that walkers or riders are denied their human rights because they cannot walk or ride where that mud is.

Of course, we support the measures to improve protection of sites of special scientific interest, wildlife, biodiversity and many other areas. All the concerns that we might have on the detail can be addressed in Committee. I hope and, from earlier conversations, believe that the Minister will seek to engage constructively on those issues. But if I may say so, all those parts have been added to what is clearly a suitable legislative vehicle—part 1 of the Bill. Because part 1 is seriously wanting in achieving the objectives that the Government lay down, we must oppose the Bill, and have therefore tabled the amendment. I say to the hon. Member for Lewes, who scorned our position, that it is because we believe the flaws of part 1 are too major to be addressed by amendment in Committee that we have decided to table an amendment on Second Reading.

A great deal has been made of simplification, removal of red tape and fewer visits—all those words were used by the Secretary of State—but I want to give one example of the sort of problem that exists today, and that will not be helped one iota by the proposals in this Bill. Unfortunately, the source of the story must be anonymous, as the farmer involved is understandably concerned about what might happen as regards the officials involved.

The issue is one of a long-redundant ferry operating across an estuary in England, where the hard standing had been neglected for a century. A meeting was held to discuss restoring it. The meeting took all morning and was attended by two farmers who owned the land, one part-time volunteer ferry operator, one member of the local voluntary amenity association, somebody from the Environment Agency, two people from the planning department, one from English Nature, and two from the joint area of outstanding natural beauty partnership. Of the 10 people there, six were being paid by the taxpayer,

[Mr. James Paice]

but the Bill would not have made any difference—it would not have reduced attendance at that meeting by a single person. We cannot expect real change unless the problem of bureaucracy is properly addressed.

We largely agree with the critique of Lord Haskins in relation to the current delivery system, but the Bill does not provide an answer. It creates a potentially massive organisation with conflicting priorities and powers to do anything that it likes. It does nothing to prevent over-zealous use of powers, and that problem already exists. It sets up three funding blocks, but does nothing directly to reduce the number of individual schemes or the form-filling. We are far from persuaded by the Government's position on the issue of the Forestry Commission.

There is no recognition in the Bill of the importance of economic activity, particularly farming, in care for the countryside. Nowhere in the Bill is there any recognition that the landscape itself is a result of economic activity—not always for the better if judged by today's standards, but nevertheless paid for by local economic activity. The countryside and nature of England is not some twee chocolate box scene to be frozen in time: it is home to 23 per cent. of the population and the workplace of most of them. The Government have delegated some of the delivery to regional development agencies, whereas county councils and local councils could have done a better job with greater accountability. That raises the issue of the voice of those 23 per cent. and the proposed commission for rural communities. That body has no powers, is appointed by the Secretary of State and therefore has no credibility with rural communities.

No Conservative Member doubts that rural people need a voice. We have watched for eight years while the Government have ignored their plight, even with the Countryside Agency and the rural advocate, so why would an even weaker body make any difference? The real voice of rural people is their elected representatives: local councillors and Members of the House. Indeed, it was that voice that spoke on 5 May and brought my hon. Friends to this place.

Yet again, we have seen the tendency of the Government to believe that the public are best served by a large organisation lacking direct accountability. The objective of rationalisation and simplification is, of course, worthy but the chosen method is wrong. Instead, the Government should have examined how to simplify the system itself—the complexities of the single farm payment, of the entry level and higher level scheme. Those are all examples where simplification of the schemes could come ahead of changing the structures. The Government should have sought to work with existing local structures and local accountability. The flaws in their proposals are too great to be corrected by amendment. They should think again. I commend the amendment to the House.

9.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Knight): This has been an excellent and welcome early debate on rural affairs, putting the Bill into a wider context. I apologise at the start that I will not have time to respond in detail to the many points that have been made.

As the Secretary of State said earlier, the Bill is the cornerstone of our plans to achieve the agenda set out in the rural strategy. It will provide the legislative framework to help us to realise our vision of thriving rural communities, of fair access to services for all in the countryside and of rich, diverse landscapes managed and enhanced for current and future generations.

Our rural reforms will benefit rural businesses, with fewer forms and quicker and better advice fully attuned to rural circumstances. They will benefit rural people, with decisions taken closer to the customer and with a strong advocate for their needs. They will help people to enjoy the countryside and the coast through a single co-ordinated approach to access and to nature. They will help the environment through better sustainable management of the environment, from individual species to the landscape as a whole. Last but not least, they will benefit the taxpayer, with more efficient and effective administration that, over the medium and long term, will save over £20 million a year.

As we have heard, there have been eight excellent maiden speeches during this debate. I congratulate all those hon. Members and welcome them to the House. I join them in paying tribute to the work of their predecessors: Lawrie Quinn, Linda Perham, Andy King, Sir Sydney Chapman, Brian Cotter, Brian White, Helen Clark and Howard Flight.

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) made an excellent speech, claiming the mantle of the hon. Member for oven chips. Given the confessed rivalry between Scarborough and Whitby, I thought him brave to describe Whitby as the jewel in the crown. The hon. Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) did well in linking his London seat to rural affairs and in proving that the divide often constructed between town and country is often false. We heard a fluent and polished speech by the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright). I look forward to visiting his constituency shortly when I visit the royal show.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) paid a particularly warm tribute to Sir Sydney Chapman, saying that the House will be a poorer place for his absence. Judging by her maiden speech, the House and her party will be a richer place for her presence. The hon. Member for Weston-Super-Mare (John Penrose) talked of some of the problems of seaside towns, many of which I recognise from my own constituency. He talked of donkeys; it is clear he will not prove to be one in the House.

The hon. Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster) looks set to make an explosive impact as a firework manufacturer, and the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr. Jackson) made an excellent start as a champion for his constituents, including staff working at English Nature in Peterborough. I am not surprised at the great start made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Herbert), who I know is a polished performer. I look forward to his support for the reduction in public spending in the Bill, in the tradition of Members for that seat.

The amendment fails to understand that the purpose of the new body is to preserve and enhance the beauty about which the hon. Member for South Dorset is so poetic. *[Interruption.]* West Dorset; I am, of course, the Member for South Dorset. I am equally poetic about the

environment. Beauty is important. The right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and I both represent the beautiful Dorset countryside and understand the importance of protecting the environment for the future while developing sustainable access to it for social and economic gain. That is at the very heart of the new purpose for natural England, but we must do so in such a way that we can all enjoy it and so that the right hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine can make a living from it while shaping the landscape for current and future generations.

Natural England will be an environmental body. Its purpose is to conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment; that will be its priority. It will build on the excellent work of English Nature and the Countryside Agency, and I join my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) in paying warm tribute to that work. I also applaud the work of the rural development service on agri-environment schemes in particular.

I believe that we have struck the right balance in forming the purpose of natural England, which will be required to contribute to sustainable development. It will actively seek integrated solutions that achieve the full range of sustainable development. However, natural England remains an environmental body and there will be situations where an integrated solution is not possible. Here we expect natural England to be a trenchant champion of the natural environment, as its statutory purpose makes clear.

The amendment suggests that we are failing to create a simplified scheme of support for rural communities. By bringing three new bodies together in one new body, we are simplifying arrangements for our customers and providing a streamlined framework for the delivery of support that will help us to cut red tape and confusion. That is at the core of the deregulation and simplification process that we would have expected the Opposition to support.

The Opposition also seek to deny rural areas the strong independent voice that they will have in the commission for rural communities. The commission has a unique and distinctive role to act as a voice for rural people, undistracted now by delivery functions of its own and with the purpose, set out in clause 18, of promoting awareness to all public and other bodies of rural needs. That is why it is relevant for the commission to be established; it can be a voice in respect of the actions of local authorities and regional development agencies, of which we heard much today, as well as central Government.

The commission will help to ensure that the Government's policies make a real difference, especially in tackling social disadvantage and economic exclusion. I have to say to the right hon. Member for West Dorset that I am advised that clauses 16 and 25, which he finds so objectionable in terms of undermining the independence of natural England and the commission for rural communities, which the Government want, are nothing new. They are a standard requirement for non-departmental public bodies to ensure accountability for taxpayers' money. English Nature and the Countryside Agency are currently vulnerable to similar powers of direction and I do not hear the right hon. Gentleman saying that they are not sufficiently independent.

Many Members raised the issue of rights of way and great concern has been raised, most passionately by my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), but by many others. I share the concern that irresponsible drivers of four-by-fours and trail bikes are damaging our byways and some of the most beautiful parts of our countryside. We have consulted at length on the provisions in the Bill and believe that they strike a careful balance. Our overriding aim must be to secure the future sustainability of the rights of way network.

The Bill will give landowners and others greater certainty about mechanically propelled vehicles' rights on public rights of way. That should result in a reduction in conflict and it is a great step forward from the current situation in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 of leaving it until 2026 to put in claims for those matters. Under the Bill, claims based on historic evidence would only allow for rights of way to be established for non-motorised vehicles. This will ensure that future use of rights of way will be consistent with their historic use.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) asked about the date of commencement, as did the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker). We must take care over commencement because we are extinguishing public rights, but if claims are focused on those routes that are most sustainable, the imperative will not be so strong for swift commencement. However, I put this warning on the record: if claims are submitted indiscriminately, I assure hon. Members that we shall have to commence the legislation at the very earliest opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw asked about the volume of current applications for byways to be open to all traffic and about the use of traffic regulation orders. Such applications are currently lodged with local authorities and will remain there up to commencement. We will have to deal with them under the current legislation. That is the legal advice that I have been given. I would be interested to hear from my hon. Friend what evidence he has of thousands of applications, as we are in close contact with local authorities about the level of such applications and what he said does not reflect our findings. I shall be publishing guidance on the use of traffic regulation orders and rights of way in the summer. I share my predecessor's view that traffic regulation orders are an essential management tool in respect of that issue, to which I am sure we will return in greater detail in Committee.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood raised the matters of rural funding streams and the timetable for detailed design. My hon. Friend referred to our response to his Select Committee's report. He will have noted in our response more detail about the three funds that we provided before. If it is any reassurance to him, we intend to have a mature design in place by the end of this year.

Concern was raised that the costs of setting up natural England will outweigh the savings. I can clarify that the savings envisaged by 2007–08 are £13 million—not the £11 million mentioned by the right hon. Member for West Dorset. We are not complacent and will keep a close eye on the figures and on the benefits both to rural people and the environment that we believe the changes will bring. The changes will pay for themselves within

[Jim Knight]

five years and provide £21 million of savings every year thereafter, which I am sure that the whole House would welcome.

I shall have to correspond with the right hon. Member for Fylde on the issue of information technology.

In conclusion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Bill will underpin the commitments that we made in the rural strategy and the rural manifesto, creating simpler and stronger organisational structures and transforming the way in which we deliver rural and environmental services to customers. It will reduce bureaucracy, devolve decision making, improve services and save money.

People living in the countryside will benefit from the devolution of decision making closer to the ground. The commission for rural communities will champion their needs, particularly those of people suffering from disadvantage. All will benefit from natural England, too, as it mutually reinforces the objectives of conserving and enhancing all aspects of our natural environment, helping people to enjoy and gain benefit from it. The environment will benefit from greater protection and a more coherent area-based approach to addressing its health, including biodiversity.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Jim Knight: I fear that I may run out of time, but I will give way if I can. Benefit will come, for example, as the environment adapts to climate change. I will give way to my Dorset neighbour.

Mr. Letwin: I am immensely grateful to the Minister. Briefly, will he place a note in the Library to correct paragraph 11 on page 5 of the Government's response to the Select Committee report, which states that the efficiencies will be £11.3 million by 2007–08?

Jim Knight: I will certainly look further into that and publish any correction, if necessary, in the Library.

Rural business will benefit from simplified structures and less bureaucracy, as it has to spend less time filling in forms. The rural development agencies, with their new responsibilities for business advice, will also be a better and faster source of such advice. I will work closely with the chairs to improve consistency of performance across all the RDAs and achieve devolution to local authorities through local area agreements and pathfinders, as appropriate. For the taxpayer, there will be fewer bodies and less duplication, together with more efficient administration and devolved decision making, which will save money while improving services.

The Bill will provide a flexible delivery framework that is both fit for purpose today and able to evolve to meet further future challenges—

Bob Russell: Including those involving wild flowers.

Jim Knight: Yes, including challenges relating to wild flowers, about which the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) is so concerned.

The Bill will provide a strong voice for rural communities, a fresh and integrated approach to managing the natural environment and, last but not least, best value for money for the taxpayer. On that basis, I ask the House to reject the Opposition amendment and to support the Bill tonight.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 179, Noes 349.

Division No. 5] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Baron, John
Bellingham, Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Brian
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cameron, David
Campbell, Gregory
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Curry, rh David
Davies, Quentin
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias
Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
Gibb, Nick
Goodman, Paul
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mark
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Horam, John
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald
Hunt, Jeremy
Hurd, Nick
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Jones, David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Knight, rh Greg
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Rev. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Brooks
O'Brien, Stephen
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard

Paice, James
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Scott, Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Graham
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Charles
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Wilson, Sammy
Wilson, Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Tim
Young, rh George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Michael Fabricant and
Mr. Mark Prisk

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Bob
Alexander, Danny
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Alan
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Russell
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Stephen
Byrne, Liam
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Alan
Carmichael, Alistair
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clarke, rh Charles
Clegg, Nick
Clelland, David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Patrick
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, David
Howarth, George
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Sian
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Laws, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, John
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacNeil, Angus
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall, David
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Ms Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Meacher, rh Michael
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris

Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, rh John
Price, Adam
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robertson, Angus
Rogerson, Dan
Rooney, Terry
Rowen, Paul
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine
Russell, Bob
Ryan, Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela, *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dan
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Teather, Sarah
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williams, Mark
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Gillian Merron and Mr. Dave Watts

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL COMMUNITIES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 83A(6) (Programme motions),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

Proceedings in Standing Committee

2. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 5th July 2005.

3. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

The House divided: Ayes 342, Noes 186.

Division No. 6] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Bob
Alexander, Danny
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Alan
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Russell
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Stephen
Byrne, Liam
Caborn, rh Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Alan
Carmichael, Alistair
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clarke, rh Charles
Clegg, Nick
Clelland, David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela

Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Patrick
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hancock, Mike
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Howarth, George
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Laws, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, John
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall, David
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Ms Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Meacher, rh Michael
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, rh John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Ramsell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rogerson, Dan
Rooney, Terry
Rowen, Paul
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine
Russell, Bob
Ryan, Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dari
Teather, Sarah
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williams, Mark
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gillian Merron and Mr. Dave Watts

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Peter
Amess, David
Ancram, rh Michael
Arbuthnot, rh James
Atkinson, Peter
Bacon, Richard
Baldry, Tony
Baron, John
Bellingham, Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Brian
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cameron, David
Campbell, Gregory
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Davies, Quentin
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias

Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark
Forth, rh Eric
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
Gibb, Nick
Goodman, Paul
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hague, rh William
Hammond, Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mark
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Horam, John
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald
Hunt, Jeremy
Hurd, Nick
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Jones, David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Knight, rh Greg
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Angus
Main, Anne
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Rev. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Brooks
O'Brien, Stephen
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev. Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Rosindell, Andrew
Scott, Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Graham
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Charles
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Wilson, Sammy
Wilson, Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Tim
Young, rh George

Tellers for the Noes:
Michael Fabricant and
Mr. David Ruffley

Question accordingly agreed to.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL COMMUNITIES BILL *[MONEY]*

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown in consequence of the Act, an

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

Question agreed to.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL COMMUNITIES BILL *[WAYS AND MEANS]*

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, it is expedient to authorise the making of provision requiring charges to be paid in respect of licences issued by Natural England.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

Question agreed to.

Local Energy Generation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

10.30 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a great pleasure to have this opportunity to discuss local energy generation—an important matter that was not given sufficient emphasis during the general election campaign. There is considerable consensus across the House on at least some of our objectives. I hope that we all agree that reducing demand, either through improvements to home insulation or through greater energy efficiency, should be our starting point for dealing with future energy requirements. I hope also that we agree on the desirability of promoting renewables wherever possible. I have to qualify that by saying that although I believe that all renewables are more benign than the conventional alternatives, I recognise that not all renewables are appropriate to every location, which is why recently a strong view has been expressed that microgeneration—small-scale generation within a locality for a particular household or group of households—may be a more effective alternative, which we should explore.

Microgeneration can make a significant contribution to our total energy needs. It is often more socially and environmentally acceptable than the alternatives. It allows individuals to contribute directly to energy outcomes and to affect the way in which energy is supplied in their local neighbourhood, and it is often good for the householder to be able to contribute in that way. In addition, it provides a diversity and continuity of supply, which we should all welcome.

I acknowledge the Government's interest in the subject, which has been expressed on more than one occasion, and I understand that they are drawing up a strategy under section 82 of the Energy Act 2004 to deal with microgeneration. I was heartened by the comments of one of the many predecessors of the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks) as Minister for Energy, the hon. and learned Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), who on 15 September 2004 said:

> "We expect to see more micro-CHP, micro-wind, micro-hydro, PV and fuel cells installations, supplying individual customers and buildings and exporting energy to the grid."

That is precisely my view and it is nice to see that the Government share it.

There is also a considerable degree of parliamentary interest in the subject, as evidenced by the Bill promoted in the last Parliament by the hon. Members for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) and for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell). I expect that that measure will be reintroduced in this Parliament.

Microgeneration takes a number of forms, including micro-combined heat and power; micro-wind, which is being successfully championed by another former Energy Minister, the former Member for Western Isles; fuel cells; and photovoltaics, which I saw being used to great advantage in Japan when I visited with the Committee on Science and Technology. In Japan, there is a much clearer Government policy of incorporating into their equivalent of building regulations requirements for photovoltaics in buildings, which means that in the very near future Japan will have a large number of buildings that are so equipped. Perhaps we in this country should consider varying our building regulations in a similar fashion. To complete the list of methods of microgeneration, we have heat pumps, solar thermal and micro-hydroelectric.

I shall concentrate on the last of those categories, as I have seen some extraordinarily good examples in my constituency. I recognise their value and I want to see the bureaucratic hurdles that may be preventing a wider expansion of the sector removed, if possible. I note that another of the Minister's predecessors, the hon. Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms), now the Minister for Pensions, said on 29 April 2004 that there could be up to 40,000 locations in the UK where micro-hydro could be implemented. I am happy to say that a significant number of those are in my constituency. My constituency consists of the Somerset levels, which are much too flat to be appropriate for hydroelectric power, and the edge of the Mendip hills, which are very suitable. There are a large number of old mills there which were formerly used for flour or other grinding or in connection with the iron industry in days gone by and which are suitable for conversion.

We have two extremely active groups in my constituency. One is based in the south Somerset area and is a shining example. I have been pleased to be associated with it by attending the opening and visiting it on a number of occasions. At Gant's mill just outside Bruton, Brian and Alison Shingler have produced an excellent project which is not only generating power, but acting as an educational facility for people visiting the mill. Much of the leg work and the energy behind these proposals comes from Keith Wheaton-Green who works for South Somerset district council.

The other group is the Mendip power group. A few months ago I had the opportunity to visit Tellisford mill on the River Frome, where Anthony Batttersby is in the process of installing a water turbine. The Mendip power group has a number of other mills, several of them on the River Frome, such as Stowford, Rode, Shawford, Clifford and Staplemead creamery, and on tributaries, such as Bridge house at Great Elm, Coleford and Witham Hole. In all there are 14 sites associated with the Mendip power group. It is anticipated that those 14 sites will produce 855,000 kWh per year, which is a significant contribution. It is enough to power 195 homes and will save 400 metric tonnes of CO_2, which is the equivalent of a car travelling 2 million miles. That seems to me a worthwhile objective. Tellisford mill alone will produce 170,000 kWh, which is enough for 40 houses. That is approximately the size of the hamlet of Tellisford, so we have a local energy generation plant that is producing the energy to power that community. That seems a correct way of approaching the problem.

As regards costs, at Wallbridge mill, another site in the group, there was an existing turbine which needed restoration. That cost £25,000. Tellisford was a ruined mill. It needed a new turbine, which cost £120,000. There is about an 11-year break-even period.

What are the problems faced by the people at the forefront of addressing the issues of energy production through local power generation? Some of the problems are generic to all microgeneration facilities. Despite the best efforts of Ministers in the Department, which I

[Mr. David Heath]

acknowledge, there is the lack of a co-ordinated approach across the whole. I know that there is an attempt to deal with this, but it is still clear that Government Departments are not entirely at one in providing the clear focus on the need for renewables that we would wish to see.

I received an unsolicited illustration of that point in the post when it was announced that I had secured this Adjournment debate. Given my constituency's location, the letter came from an unlikely source, the City Remembrancer of the Corporation of London, who points out the difficulties that the Corporation of London has experienced with its combined heat and power system in the City, which, as a result of the introduction of the new electricity trading arrangements, can be economically run only at peak periods when electricity can be sold at higher prices. That is nonsense; the facility is capable of doing so much more, and it seems a shame that it should be partially mothballed in order to meet other requirements.

There are also fiscal barriers to progress. A correspondence has taken place between not only the Department of Trade and Industry, but other Departments about the application of business rates and income tax. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs sent Keith Wheaton-Green a helpful letter in which she made it plain that she has a great deal of sympathy for people affected by that point. She was happy to confirm that the existence of a microgeneration facility would not prejudice a domestic property by incurring a business rate liability. If such a microgeneration facility is a business, however, that is not necessarily the case, and such matters are examined individually.

That letter also states:

"On income tax, DTI and HM Treasury officials are currently examining this issue in order to see if there is a way of exempting microgenerating householders from income tax when exporting electricity."

It is dated 7 April 2005, and I would be grateful if the Minister told me whether any advances have been made in that consideration. It seems to me that there is an argument for the introduction of a threshold—perhaps 50 kW—below which there is no risk of incurring either a business rate or income tax liability. Perhaps the Minister will consider that point. Those who are promoting the microgeneration Bill would also like to see a requirement to purchase energy on the part of the utilities, which would provide certainty and stability that is otherwise lacking.

Those who are interested in hydroelectrics have forcibly pointed out the difficulties with the licensing system. They showed me the forms that they must fill in, which are astonishingly complex. There is virtually no difference between applying to run a small water turbine and applying to run Hinkley Point in terms of the complexity of the information that is required, the volume of impounded water and other similar matters. That makes it very difficult for someone who is not expert even to attempt to apply. The process is lengthy, and it can take more than three months to obtain a licence from the Environment Agency. It is also expensive and can cost more than £2,000, including the necessary advertising costs, and I question whether it is necessary. Could it be subsumed within the planning process? Could we introduce a threshold below which such activities are exempt as permitted development, which might apply to not only water turbines, but micro-wind turbines, too? Such policies would certainly promote the use of microgeneration among householders.

On financial support, the clear skies grant does not match the required scale of investment in water turbines. The contribution is very small, and the scale of the available grant does not encourage maximum output, which one might expect to be the object of Government policy. If the clear skies grant is changed, I can only put in a plea for its replacement by something simple and non-competitive—it should be certain that a grant will be received once a project is completed in order to encourage a lot of people who might otherwise have doubts.

Perhaps the Minister might also like to consider the possibility of interest-free loans. I understand that the Government are not normally desperately keen on providing those; nevertheless, if we have a clear policy objective and a high capital outlay, there is clearly an incentive for the Government to look at ways of reducing liabilities for the householder in the early part of an investment period.

There is a disparity between what the utilities provide in terms of grant, and an incredibly complicated payment system, with renewable obligation certificates, levy exemption certificates, and payments from the utility companies. At the end of a Westminster Hall debate on 23 March, the hon. and learned Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) made an intriguing comment about what he described as ROC-ettes—that is, renewable obligation certificates in a diminutive form appropriate to microgeneration. I wonder whether any further work has been done on that.

If we are serious about encouraging water turbines, we must accept that it must be a high priority in the use of our water resources and should perhaps have a higher priority than some of the other competing interests. There should be an onus on the responsible authorities to ensure riverine maintenance in order to allow turbines to work effectively.

There are all sorts of reasons why this technology is appropriate. Its locality means that there is a minimal line loss. It promotes economic activity in rural areas. It has the capacity to operate in environmentally sensitive locations. That is rare for any technology, but this is also something that enhances local life, brings historic buildings back into use and aids their conservation, gives a continuity to all the technologies that may be worth rediscovering, and contributes to the overall energy requirement of the country. It is a technology that is worth supporting and whose time has come.

It would be very good if there were permanently established opportunities for householders to see such technologies in action around the country. I spent the last week at the Royal Bath and West show, where it occurred to me that it would be a perfect site for a permanent exhibition given the number of people who go through there and are interested in the use of technologies in rural areas and diversity within the agricultural community.

This is a perfect opportunity to show the potential for alternative technologies in producing energy in ways that are entirely compatible with the rural environment. I hope that the Minister may be able to help us in pointing the way forward.

10.47 pm

The Minister for Energy (Malcolm Wicks): It is a pleasure to make my first House of Commons speech as Energy Minister on such an important subject, on which I share the enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). I congratulate him on securing the debate.

Microgeneration is a key area of the Government's energy policy. It has the potential to play a significant role as we move towards our objective of sustainable, reliable and affordable energy for all, delivered through competitive markets. Increased deployment of microgeneration technologies will have a beneficial impact on all four of the Government's energy policy goals. These technologies can reduce carbon emissions; help to ensure reliable energy supplies by reducing the load on the distribution network and helping to avoid over-dependence on energy imports; promote competitive markets by offering the consumer a wider choice of the means to fulfil their heat and electricity needs; and help to reduce fuel poverty, provided that the fairly substantial up-front costs can be defrayed.

Many different technologies fall under the microgeneration heading: solar power, including photovoltaics, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned; micro-wind turbines; ground source heat pumps; air source heat pumps; and micro-combined heat and power, to name but a few. Micro-hydro power is an illustrious member of this group with a proud history—in the 18th and 19th centuries thousands of mills in this country used the power of water to grind flour and wheat. I wonder whether when they were built they had their protesters too. I understand that a proportion of those old mill sites would be appropriate for generating electricity.

There are obvious limitations to the scope of micro-hydro installations, but this is nevertheless an important technology with much potential in parts of the country that are fortunate enough to benefit from free-flowing water courses.

Our commitment to promoting all forms of microgeneration is long established. The Energy White Paper set out our vision for 2020—a vision that includes much more diverse local energy generation. We want to see more of these exciting technologies providing heat and electricity for individual consumers and communities. We are already doing much to make that vision a reality. For example, since 2002 we have provided £41 million of support for solar power projects, and £12.5 million for household and community renewables projects through the clear skies initiative.

We have ensured that most microgeneration technologies benefit from a low—5 per cent.—VAT level. We amended the renewables obligation order to make it easier for smaller generators to claim renewables obligation certificates. Last year we issued planning policy statement 22 to establish that local authorities could set targets for on-site renewable generation. We have been working closely with Ofgem and other key stakeholders to address various technical issues relating to metering and connection to the distribution network.

Let me deal specifically with the support given to micro-hydro projects. We have been keen to promote hydropower through the clear skies initiative, and so far 12 projects have received funding. As the hon. Gentleman knows, South Somerset district council is working in partnership with mill owners to install a number of small-scale hydro plants and energy efficiency measures on mill sites across the area. Two mills—one, I suspect, the one that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Gants mill—are already on line and generating power, with another seven scheduled for completion by the end of 2006. The project has received £93,000 from the Energy Saving Trust.

Despite all that activity, we are not complacent, and recognise that we need to do more. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of our commitment under the Energy Act 2004 to produce a strategy for the promotion of microgeneration by April 2006.

There is much more work be done in assessing the real costs and benefits of microgeneration in the long term. We need to have a clear picture of the barriers that currently prevent widespread take-up. We must develop a substantial evidence base that allows us to identify the most cost-effective measures to promote microgeneration technologies.

Three factors appear to be acting as barriers—although the hon. Gentleman has highlighted possible other factors—and hindering the development of mature markets for microgeneration products. First, there is the elevated price of most microgeneration technologies. A lack of demand to date has restricted the extent to which the industry has been able to exploit scale economies. The infancy of the industry and the significant expenditure on research and development associated with product development also contribute to the existing high costs that deter many consumers.

Secondly, there is a lack of information. Inadequate promotion and provision of information about microgeneration products is a contributory factor in slow take-up rates. In many cases, consumers are unaware of the existence of such products and the benefits they can bring through reduced energy bills. Finally, there are some technical constraints relating to metering arrangements and connection to the distribution network.

The hon. Gentleman raised other issues—for instance, planning and building regulations. I am advised that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is in the process of reviewing the relevant part of the building regulations—part L, I am informed. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned income tax and business rates. I can tell him that initial meetings have taken place between officials in my Department and in Her Majesty's Treasury, and we will continue to explore those issues.

The hon. Gentleman talked about permitted development status for micro-hydro. I am advised that the ODPM is reviewing householder consents, and I shall be happy to raise the hon. Gentleman's points with the relevant Minister. He also referred to the complexity of licensing systems. I am told that the Environment Agency's hydropower working group is developing a best-practice guide for the hydropower industry, and I hope that in that way some of the issues will be explored.

[Malcolm Wicks]

To inform our work on the strategy, I shall shortly be publishing for consultation a document that will look at many of the issues the hon. Gentleman has raised. The aim of the consultation is to stimulate a wide-ranging debate on some of the difficult issues that seem to be acting as barriers to the widespread uptake of microgeneration. I do not think that there will be any easy answers, but by working with key stakeholders and interested parties—and indeed the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, with whom I want to talk further about this—I hope to develop a strategy for the promotion of microgeneration that will take us towards a future with much more local and diverse generation. There is no silver bullet, no single answer, when it comes to fulfilling the future energy requirements of our nation in the 21st century, but I am convinced that renewables—and within that category, microgeneration—have a significant part to play.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 June 2005

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND TRANSPORT FOR LONDON BILL

Order for Second Reading Read

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 14 June.

LIVERPOOL CITY COUNCIL (PROHIBITION OF SMOKING IN PLACES OF WORK) BILL *[Lords]*

Motion made,

That so much of the Lords Message [19th May] as relates to the Liverpool City Council (Prohibition of Smoking in Places of Work) Bill *[Lords]* be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Wednesday 15 June.

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES (PROHIBITION OF SMOKING IN PLACES OF WORK) BILL *[Lords]*

Motion made,

That so much of the Lords Message [19th May] as relates to the London Local Authorities (Prohibition of Smoking in Places of Work) Bill *[Lords]* be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Wednesday 15 June.

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[Lords]*

Motion made,

That so much of the Lords Message [19th May] as relates to the London Local Authorities Bill *[Lords]* be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Tuesday 14 June.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Nuclear Power

1. **Mr. Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): What responsibilities are devolved, and which reserved, in relation to any decision to commission and locate a new nuclear power station in Scotland. [1948]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Alistair Darling): New power stations in Scotland require consent, under the Electricity Act 1989, from Scottish Executive Ministers. Nuclear energy and installations, including nuclear safety, security and safeguards, are reserved, subject to exceptions set out in the Scotland Act 1998.

Mr. Weir: I thank the Minister for that reply, but it does not make it entirely clear what the planning position is as regards nuclear power stations. The Minister will know that there is huge opposition to new nuclear power stations in Scotland and to nuclear dumps in Scotland. Will he give a cast-iron guarantee that the United Kingdom Government will not seek to impose a new nuclear power station on Scotland without the express consent of the Scottish Parliament using its planning powers?

Mr. Darling: The position is absolutely clear, and if the hon. Gentleman had given the matter even the slightest investigation, he would see that. At the end of the day, because the Scottish Executive would have to give planning permission, it is for them to decide whether a large nuclear power station should be built. The matter rests with them. It will be up to the Scottish Executive, and the Ministers in that are, of course, answerable to the Scottish Parliament.

Anne Moffat (East Lothian) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the one thing that is fundamental to the people of Scotland is security of supply, and if they were asked a question about the future of nuclear power and whether there should be a station, they would say yes if that would ensure security of supply?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. It is important that we maintain the security of supply of electricity in Scotland, as in the whole United Kingdom. Nuclear power has played an important part in generating electricity in Scotland in Torness in my hon. Friend's constituency. Of course, when we discuss future generation requirements, we need to consider all aspects of electricity generation. One of the problems with the nationalists is that they know very well what they are against but are not very clear what they are for.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Con): The Secretary of State has not made his answer clear. This is not just about planning permission; it is about energy policy. He must be well aware that his Government are quite likely to propose the building of new nuclear power stations generally, while many Members of the Scottish Executive have publicly declared their opposition to nuclear power. Surely the Secretary of State must realise that this is not just a matter of planning permission but of serious constitutional difficulty. How does he propose to resolve it?

Mr. Darling: First, I welcome the hon. Lady's appointment as shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) did not last more than a few days before he was discarded by the leader of the Conservative party; in fact, he must be the only person nominated as shadow Secretary of State never even to make it to the first Question Time, let alone do anything else.

In relation to the hon. Lady's question, the position is very clearly set out in the Electricity Act 1989 and the Scotland Act 1998. As I said in my earlier answer, new nuclear power stations in Scotland require consent from the Scottish Executive under the Electricity Act 1989; nothing could be clearer than that.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what we really need in this country is an intelligent, mature national debate on how we deliver on our future energy requirement in the light of global warming? Does he, like me, long for the day when the Scottish nationalists, in particular, can deliver on showing a bit of maturity?

Mr. Darling: Most of us have long given up on my hon. Friend's last point. On his substantive point, yes, there is a big debate to be had, not only in Scotland but in the whole United Kingdom, about electricity supply. We all know that the difficulty with nuclear power stations is the disposal of waste, which is a big question that needs to be answered. Equally, however, we are aware that although many people are signed up to the proposition of more and more renewable energy, the fact is that whenever sites are proposed there are substantial objections, sometimes for understandable reasons, and those need to be resolved as well.

The position of all the Opposition parties at the moment, one way or the other, seems to be that something needs to be done, whether or not they are against any possible solution. As a country, we need to face up to the fact that we will need to replace our energy generation over the next few years, we need to have a sensible debate about the pros and cons of each type of electricity generation, and then we need to make decisions. The difference between us and them, I suppose, is that we are in a position in which we have to make decisions, whereas they are unlikely to be in that position for some considerable time.

Economy

2. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on the performance of the Scottish economy by comparison with the English economy. [1949]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Alistair Darling): Both the Scottish and English economies continue to benefit from the stability delivered by the Government. We are currently benefiting from the longest period of sustained low inflation since the 1960s. Interest rates remain low, and strong labour market policies have boosted employment across the UK.

Andrew Selous: What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the effect on Scottish business of higher business rates north of the border? Does he think that those might have contributed in any way to the fact that Scotland's gross domestic product grew by more than 1 per cent. less last year than the United Kingdom's as a whole?

Mr. Darling: The Scottish economy is growing well. The Scottish Executive has taken a number of steps to reduce the impact of business rates to make sure that they protect businesses as far as possible. I remind the hon. Gentleman—I am not sure how detailed his studies of the Scottish economy are—that all current business surveys are optimistic that Scotland's economic growth will continue and that Scotland has a higher employment rate than any other European Union country bar Denmark, and higher than in England. That shows that the Scottish economy is strong. Of course, other measures need to be taken to continue that growth, both to support business as well as more general steps, but I assure him that, should he care to come to Scotland, he will see a picture in many cases of great optimism, which stands in stark contrast to the position 10 or 15 years ago when his party was in government.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the growth of research and development in life sciences and biochemicals is crucial to the Scottish economy generally and to my constituency in particular? Can he give assurances that the Government will continue to support the pioneering work being done by, for example, Dundee university, whose principal I will meet later this week?

Mr. Darling: Let me congratulate my hon. Friend on winning his seat in Dundee, West. I am sure that he will be a worthy successor to Ernie Ross, whom many on this side of the House, and in all parts of the House, will remember with great affection. In relation to research and development, he is right: Dundee is an excellent example of substantial investment and research in the new biosciences in universities and other institutions. That has been good for the universities, which have a worldwide reputation, and has seen companies built up on the back of that research and beginning to exploit the fruits of it. Dundee university and others in Tayside have been extremely active in promoting that, and I am glad that my hon. Friend is drawing the House's attention to that.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State aware that one of the reasons why we have had three quarterly downturns in growth in Scotland since 1997 has been the loss of more than 100,000 manufacturing jobs? What has he done as Secretary of State—or what has his deputy done—to point out our vital jobs, such as those at Fergusons in Port Glasgow, and to explain to the Liberal-Labour Ministers in the Scottish Executive that fisheries protection vessels are allocated elsewhere in Europe as grace ships, which would allow the award of a vital contract to a suitable Scottish yard, such as Fergusons?

Mr. Darling: The commissioning of fishery protection vessels is a matter for the Scottish Executive, as the hon. Gentleman knows. If there is any discussion as to what classification they ought to have, that is a matter for the Scottish Executive to pursue with the European Commission.

In relation to employment generally, I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not draw attention to the fact that his constituency has seen a dramatic reduction in unemployment since 1997. Nor did he draw the House's attention to the fact that the Scottish economy has grown strongly since 1997, and as I said a few moments ago, the employment rate in Scotland is higher

than in most other parts of Europe. I remind him that were we to pursue his policies of tearing Scotland away from the rest of the United Kingdom, they would undoubtedly cause large-scale unemployment in Scotland.

G8 Summit

3. **Ann McKechin** (Glasgow, North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his Department's preparations for the G8 summit in July. [1950]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Alistair Darling): As the House knows, the key themes for the summit are Africa and climate change. We will press for agreement on reducing poverty in Africa and on how best to address the problem of climate change in the world.

Ann McKechin: As my right hon. Friend knows, there will be a major demonstration in his home city of Edinburgh on 2 July. Does he agree that the most important part of the summit will be ensuring that the voice of Africa is heard, that real progress is made in the fight against global poverty and that the thousands of people in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom who want to protest peacefully are able to do so on 2 July? Will he tell us whether he intends to join them?

Mr. Darling: Like everyone else, I am well aware that of the intention to mount a large-scale demonstration in Edinburgh on 2 July. I believe that the vast majority of people who come to Edinburgh will be there to call for an increased effort on the part of Governments to make poverty history, as well as to address the issue of climate change.

I think that we have a unique opportunity in Scotland, perhaps a once-in-a-generation opportunity, for the international community to come together, put its past difficulties behind it and present proposals that would make a real difference to reducing poverty not just in Africa but in other parts of the world, as well as dealing with the pressing problems of climate change. Nothing that happens should detract from the importance of the event. I hope that all who go to Edinburgh, as well as all the world leaders who go to Gleneagles and to Scotland in July, keep that at the front of their minds, and I hope that what happens in Scotland will give us an opportunity to build and make the world a better place.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware of my concern about public safety in Edinburgh—that of both visitors and residents—at the time of the G8 summit. What proposals are being discussed to reduce the risks to those travelling to Edinburgh and to those affected by major events in Edinburgh over the week, to ensure that they are safe at the end of the protest?

Mr. Darling: The organisers of the Make Poverty History march have been in touch with the police and the other agencies, and there has been a lot of planning to ensure that the demonstration remains peaceful and those on it can make their point peacefully and within the law. That is what we all want.

If other people wish to mount demonstrations or do similar things, they must contact the police and get in touch with the council and others. Edinburgh is a comparatively small city, with a population of 450,000. As I said earlier, it would be a tragedy if the focus were on problems relating to the march rather than on far bigger issues that affect the whole world—making poverty history, and climate change. Those are the big issues.

The chief constables for Lothian and Borders and for Tayside have primary responsibility for policing. The relevant councils are also involved. I hope that what happens in Edinburgh and in the rest of Scotland during the week is peaceful, and that it is remembered for the good thing—for what ought to be the beginning of making poverty history.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, East) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that climate change is one of the big issues on the agenda. Does he agree that many of the peoples most threatened by climate change are the small nations in the Pacific, many of which are already only a few feet above sea level? Will he ensure that the plight of those poor people is discussed thoroughly at the G8 summit, as well as the plight of the deserving peoples of Africa?

Mr. Darling: I think that the events of Boxing day last year demonstrate my hon. Friend's point graphically. Obviously the tsunami was caused by movements of the earth several thousand miles away, but there is no doubt that climate change is having an adverse effect on water levels.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is a pressing issue. The Government raised it in Kyoto, and played a leading role in the Kyoto discussions of the late 1990s. All nations, especially developed nations but also those that are developing rapidly, need to pay attention to the consequences of economic activity, and start taking steps now to prevent the problems that will occur if we do nothing.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Con): I entirely agree with what the Secretary of State has just said. I also share his concern about what might happen in Edinburgh in terms of safety and security during the G8 summit.

The Secretary of State rightly chose his words carefully. I do not have to be quite so careful. Let me say that, although we all adore Sir Bob Geldof and applaud his good intentions, all he has done for Africa and the publicity he has brought to a cause in which we all believe, the idea of flooding Edinburgh with a million protesters is simply not a good one. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on Bob Geldof to reverse his call for people to flood Edinburgh, and for him instead to encourage people simply to support the already well organised Make Poverty History event on Saturday 2 July?

Mr. Darling: The shadow Secretary of State for Scotland needs to be careful. Her predecessor was not very careful—and look where he is sitting now.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I spoke the truth.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman says that he spoke the truth. There is obviously a sinner who is not repenting at all, and we look forward to hearing from him further.

On the more serious matter, no one doubts Bob Geldof's conviction and his determination to make the world a better place. What he did 20 years ago with Band Aid was truly remarkable and deserves nothing but praise. I am sure that in expressing his sentiments, he was saying that he wanted the Make Poverty History march to be a success and for progress to be made at the G8 summit. As I said earlier, there is a serious point. We want this summit and the events surrounding it to be remembered for Governments making progress towards reducing poverty and addressing climate change. That is why, if anyone wants to arrange new events or to do other things, I strongly advise them to get in touch with the police, the council and the others involved, so that we can ensure that those who come to Edinburgh can be accommodated safely and that the demonstration is peaceful. Above all, there is the small matter of accommodation. As the hon. Lady will know, Edinburgh is an extremely hospitable place that accommodates many thousands of people each year. But even Edinburgh, despite its renowned hospitality, can reach the stage where it is full up.

Mrs. Laing: This is most unusual—I agree with the Secretary of State again, and I hope that many people will pay heed to what he has just said. Does he agree that in addition to the aims of the G8—I share his views on that point—this is a great opportunity to show that Gleneagles and the surrounding countryside is one of the most beautiful places in the world? Which of Scotland's many other great benefits will the Secretary of State be promoting to the thousands of extra visitors that the G8 will bring to our country?

Mr. Darling: There are many aspects of Scotland that I will promote, but while the hon. Lady is waxing so lyrical, perhaps she could add to her list the benefits of a strong economy, low inflation, increased prosperity and low unemployment. Those are all the benefits that Scotland has seen thanks to a Labour Government.

Renewable Energy

4. **Mark Lazarowicz** (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues regarding the development of renewable energy sources in Scotland. [1951]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Cairns): Scotland Office Ministers and officials are in regular contact with UK Departments and the Scottish Executive on a wide range of energy-related issues.

Mark Lazarowicz: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer and congratulate him on his appointment to the Scotland Office. He will know that Ocean Power Delivery, which is headquartered in my constituency, has won a contract to build the world's first commercial wave farm, showing that Scotland and the UK can lead the world in renewable energy. However, he will also know that that wave farm is to be situated in Portugal. What can he do to ensure that Scotland and the UK develop wave energy on a commercial basis? I should add that such a programme would cost much less than the £10 billion required to support a civil nuclear programme.

David Cairns: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I am aware of the project that he mentions, and I congratulate OPD on winning that order from the Portuguese. This is a Scottish success story, in that we have developed the technology that is being purchased abroad. Of course, the project would not have reached this stage had it not been for the investment of a significant amount of taxpayers' money. OPD has benefited from £3.2 million of such investment from the Department of Trade and Industry's technology programme, and it is benefiting from the investment of £6 million in the European marine energy centre in Orkney, where such technology is being trialled. In addition, a £50 million fund is to be set aside, which OPD can bid into to develop marine energy further. Taken together, that demonstrates that the Government are not only committed to renewable energy but are making resources available to make that happen in Scotland and elsewhere.

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I add my welcome to the hon. Gentleman in his new capacity. When he discusses renewable energy with his colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry, will he highlight the potential around the whole coast of Scotland for tidal current energy? Is he aware that a project currently under way off the coast of Caithness could see commercial generation within 18 months, that the project is reckoned to be some 400 per cent. more efficient than onshore wind, but that the required grid transmission space is blocked by wind farms that may never be built? Will he therefore ensure that his colleagues understand the need, particularly from the north and the islands, to have a suitable reservation of grid capacity?

David Cairns: Yes, I am aware of those concerns. If the hon. Gentleman wants to talk to me further about the specific project that he has in mind, I will be happy to do so. As he knows, it is simply a fact that wind technology is at a far greater stage of advancement. If we are to meet our ambitious target of producing 10 per cent. of electricity from renewable sources, it will be achieved largely through wind technology. However, wave technology is not that far behind, and we are making additional sums available so that it can be progressed. Eighteen months seems an ambitious target; I have been told that it will be some three years before the project comes on stream. However, I will be happy to continue that dialogue with him.

Skills Gap

5. **Mr. Tom Harris** (Glasgow, South) (Lab): What plans the Government has to close the skills gap in Scotland. [1952]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Cairns): While lifelong learning in Scotland, including a strategy for skills and training for

employment, is a devolved matter for Scottish Executive Ministers, the Government continue to play a key role through our active labour market policies, the new deal programmes and the skills for business network among other initiatives.

Mr. Harris: I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on his well deserved promotion to ministerial office. Is he aware of research by Futureskills Scotland, which has concluded that skills shortages in Scotland are not a big problem—they account for just over 0.5 per cent. of all jobs? Is that not testimony to the success of the Scottish economy and a warning to those wee Scotlanders who seek to make political capital out of talking down the Scottish economy?

David Cairns: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I have seen the extensive Futureskills Scotland report, which surveyed some 7,500 employers. The picture that emerges is of a very strong Scottish economy and a strong Scottish labour market. To reiterate the point that the Secretary of State made earlier, there are more people per capita in work in Scotland than in any other country bar Denmark, which is testimony to our active labour market policies and to the strength of the Scottish economy, which has been brought about by the Government. There are still issues around skills shortages and gaps. My hon. Friend is right that they are relatively small but they disproportionately affect small businesses. The Futureskills Scotland report has come up with recommendations. It is imperative that the Scottish Executive, the enterprise companies and businesses take those forward. We have a role to play in that through the macroeconomic policies that we pursue and through such schemes as the new deal, which has addressed individuals' skills shortages and helped 65,000 Scots back into work. It is astonishing that not every party in the House is united behind the new deal and that some parties wish to abolish it.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position on the Front Bench. Can he confirm that filling the skills gap is not merely about training for those with no skills but an ongoing process of retraining and upskilling for those who have skills? Can he confirm that the Government should take the lead in that? What endeavours are under way in the Scotland Office to encourage retraining and upskilling for Department staff? Can he advise of any initiatives to encourage non-financial staff in the Scotland Office to undertake financial training?

David Cairns: On the broader issue that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the Government have—*[Interruption.]* I do indeed welcome the hon. Gentleman to his first Scotland Office questions. He has got off to a good start by asking a semi-decent question. Perhaps his colleague, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), might learn some lessons from that.

On the general issue that the hon. Gentleman raised, the Government have a role to play through the new deal, via the personal advisers who identify skills shortages in individuals and then help them back into the labour market. It would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman's party wholeheartedly supported the new deal, instead of moaning about it from the sidelines as it has done. In Scotland, we have seen a growing economy, low inflation, low interest rates, low unemployment and record levels of people in work, all of which have been created by an economy that has been run effectively from the Government side of the House.

G8 Summit

6. **Gordon Banks** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the First Minister in relation to policing at the forthcoming G8 summit. [1953]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Alistair Darling): I am in regular contact with the First Minister, and we discuss a wide range of issues, including the G8 summit.

Gordon Banks: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. As he knows, the G8 summit is taking place in my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire. With the advent of Live 8 and Bob Geldof's encouragement for getting a million people to converge on Scotland during a week in which "T in the Park" and the world-famous Alva games are also going on in my constituency, is my right hon. Friend concerned that it will be a difficult week for our police, and that that might overshadow the main event? What further assurances can he give my constituents about the burden of police costs for the G8 summit?

Mr. Darling: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his election victory. Labour Members are very pleased to see him in his place. My hon. Friend will no doubt take the opportunity to raise any concerns that he or his constituents have with the chief constable of Tayside, who is responsible for policing around Gleneagles. As I said a few moments ago, it is essential for people who want to demonstrate peacefully and make their point to talk to the police, if they have not already done so, and also to the local authorities, because we want the G8 summit to be remembered for making poverty history. That provides a good opportunity to see Scotland at its very best.

CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

The Minister of State was asked—

Disabled Access (Polling Stations)

16. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): If she will make a statement on disabled access to polling stations in the recent General Election. [1902]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs (Bridget Prentice): It is Government policy that all polling stations should be accessible to all voters. Local councils have a duty to provide polling places that are, so far as is reasonable and practicable, accessible to disabled electors.

Miss McIntosh: I congratulate the hon. Lady and welcome her to her new position. There are particular problems in rural parts of North Yorkshire, where long distances separate polling stations. I understand that not every polling station there is yet disabled-accessible for the purposes of a general election. What is her Department doing, in consultation with returning officers, to make the requisite facilities available to ensure that, as far as possible, those who have a disability and wish to vote in person can do so?

Bridget Prentice: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her kind words. I know that she takes a keen interest in this aspect of Government policy. We are keen that all electors, whatever their ability or disability, should have the opportunity to vote. Since certain provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 came into effect last October, we have worked with local authorities to ensure that disabled access is available at every polling station. Indeed, local councils have been given grants of up to 50 per cent. to ensure that that happens. If there is a particular problem in the hon. Lady's constituency and if she sends me a note about it, I shall be pleased to respond and follow the matter up.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): It is good to see my hon. Friend in her new ministerial position. Will she make it clear to returning officers that, although enormous progress has been made in making polling stations wheelchair-accessible—dealing with the biggest barrier to disabled people—it is not enough to have a ramp on just one door, particularly if it is not the main door? Someone in a wheelchair who arrives to vote on their own then has to get into the polling station to tell someone to open the main door, so the ramp may be of little advantage in facilitating access. It is a fine point, but an important one, because too often in polling stations, the door that is made accessible to wheelchairs is not the main door and the one that is opened is not always easily accessible.

Bridget Prentice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for providing us with helpful information from her own experience; her advice is very welcome. She is quite right that if people with disabilities, particularly those in wheelchairs, can gain access to the building but further obstacles are put in their way, it amounts only to a halfway house. We shall certainly ensure that returning officers are reminded that they must look at this issue as a whole. Facilities will be made available to help them make sure that everyone has the opportunity to vote and that the process is easy. That is crucial.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister speak to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about the problems that many disabled people in Northern Ireland experience with access to polling stations?

Bridget Prentice: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, because we can learn from the example of Northern Ireland in this respect. The chief electoral officer there has the right to review the accessibility of polling stations every four years and we intend to adopt that practice throughout the rest of the UK.

Juries

17. **Bill Wiggin** (Leominster) (Con): What plans she has to conduct research into the deliberations and requirements of juries. [1904]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs (Bridget Prentice): My Department has no plans to change the ability of juries to engage in deliberations, but we are looking at proposals to ensure that the best facilities are available to them.

Bill Wiggin: I think that the Department admitted, in its statement of priorities, that too many fraud cases take too long and do not reach a conclusion. What will the Minister do to improve that, without risking defendants' ancient and automatic right to trial by jury?

Bridget Prentice: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point that has implications for justice as a whole as well as for juries. Long cases do not serve justice well, and jurors face difficulties if cases go on for any length of time. We intend to seek ways to ensure that cases are shorter and we support the rules adopted by judges to that end. We believe that pre-trial management of cases is the best option, because that will ensure that jurors, defendants and victims are best served by the justice system.

Mr. Sadiq Khan (Tooting) (Lab): In my experience, the length of trials is one of the most serious problems faced by jurors, because a long trial can cause problems at home and at work. Will my hon. Friend the Minister give the House more specific details of her plans to work with judges to case-manage jury trials and to reassure the public that trial by jury will remain safe under this Labour Government?

Bridget Prentice: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and look forward to his contributions to our debates. He is right to say that our first priority is to maintain public confidence in the jury system and that jurors involved in long trials face problems as a result of disruption to their family and work life. The Department has a team looking specifically at the facilities available for jurors and we are considering how they can be improved. We need better pre-trial management and we must ensure that judges have better control in the court system. In that way, the justice system and jurors will be best served.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I welcome both the Under-Secretary and the Minister of State to their respective posts. My only regret is that the right hon. and learned Lady is not in the Chamber as Secretary of State.

I hope that both Ministers will resist the Home Office's frequent raids on trial by jury. I refer the Under-Secretary to the impasse in respect of section 43 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. She will recall that, to get that provision through the House, the Home Secretary at the time had to promise that it would not come into effect without prior discussions involving all three main parties in the House aimed at finding a better way of

securing trials for complex cases. To date, the section has not had a commencement order and no discussions have taken place. When will they take place?

Bridget Prentice: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. Section 43 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which would allow a single judge to hear a complex fraud case without a jury, was thoroughly debated during the passage of that legislation. It has not yet been implemented because it would need an affirmative resolution of both Houses before that could happen. It is within the remit of the Attorney-General, who is considering the issue, and it is my understanding that he will make an announcement on the issue shortly.

Ms Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that those of us who have worked in the criminal justice system are more or less unanimous in our belief that nothing should undermine the sanctity of the jury room? Despite pressure from the media and other sources to allow investigations into what happens in jury rooms, we ask that the Government remain firm that nothing should infringe on that privacy.

Bridget Prentice: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House. She is right about that privacy, not only for the sake of the jurors, who are performing an important public duty—we should remember that—but to maintain public confidence in the jury system. That is why we have no intention of allowing further investigation into the deliberations in the jury room.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I, too, welcome the Minister to her new position. We support research on juries, as long as it is controlled to safeguard jury confidentiality and to avoid interference. If the Government accept the need for such research, how can they justify their intention to abolish trial by jury in fraud trials before such research has been undertaken? Is not that just another unjustified attack by this Government on people's civil liberties?

Bridget Prentice: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the beginning of his question, but I am sorry that he felt the need to go on to attack what the Government propose. He is wrong on that point. The Attorney-General has already set up a review, under Stephen Wooler, to look in detail at the Jubilee line case, how it was conducted and the effect that it had on jurors and others. I cannot comment any further on that until the review is completed, but that might be a better time to discuss whether fraud cases should be tried by jury or under section 43 of the 2003 Act.

Electoral Systems

18. **Mr. John Grogan** (Selby) (Lab): What progress she has made in reviewing the electoral systems used in the UK. [1905]

The Minister of State, Department for Constitutional Affairs (Ms Harriet Harman): My Department is conducting an official level review of the experiences of the new systems for the election of Members of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the European Parliament and the Greater London assembly and Mayor.

Mr. Grogan: I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on her appointment. Has she noticed that the Cabinet Committee that is reviewing electoral systems is chaired by none other than my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister? While I am sure that he will approach the issue in open-minded fashion, does she agree that the issue would benefit from discussion by the full Cabinet, not least because some members would share my fear that, under our current electoral system, one day 36 per cent. of voters may elect not a progressive Labour Government but, almost by accident, a right-wing Tory one?

Ms Harman: As my hon. Friend understands, the purpose of the electoral system is not to elect any particular party, but to give voters a fair opportunity to express their will through our representative institutions. We have embarked on a considerable programme of voting system reform, as well as constitutional reform, and it is right that we look at the experience of the new proportional voting system and understand the effect of the electoral reform that we have already achieved.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): Does the Minister think that the closed list system used for the European parliamentary elections has made MEPs more accountable to their electorates?

Ms Harman: That is one of the things that we need to look at—*[Interruption.]* We are undertaking a review and, as the House will know, there is a balance to be struck between proportionality and simplicity. We want a fair system where there is a strong connection between the elected representative and their constituents, but in the new voting systems that we have introduced in the devolved Assemblies, and for the Mayor and the European system, there is an element of proportionality and we are reviewing those experiences.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the right hon. and learned Lady to her new duties. I also welcome her Under-Secretary.

The right hon. and learned Lady will remember that, in summer 2004, a great deal of fraud and risk of fraud was uncovered during the all-postal ballots that took place then. Afterwards, as she knows, the Electoral Commission produced a report calling on the Government to put a stop to all-postal ballots. The Government refused. Since then, we have had the Birmingham case in which our system was described as similar to that of a banana republic. The Electoral Commission produced a further report urging a stop to all-postal voting. Will she make that commitment now? May we have some fresh thinking? Will the Government say, "No all-postal ballots for the future"?

Ms Harman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome to me in my new position. Over the coming months and, I hope, years, I imagine that he and I will work closely together on this matter. The question of

electoral systems is not a partisan one although all Members think that we are experts on it and feel strongly about it.

On the all-postal voting system, we have no plans to go beyond what the House decided in the Representation of the People Act 2000, which was that any application for all-postal voting should be decided by the Secretary of State. We have no plans to go further than that, but nor do we have plans to repeal that section of the Act.

On the points that the hon. Gentleman made about fraud, I think that we can all agree not only that we want an electoral system that provides access to voting and convenience, which postal voting gives, but also that legitimacy of the outcome and security of the vote are essential. I remind him and all Members that I have sent them for discussion a policy paper on electoral administration to give them an opportunity to consider the issue before the electoral administration Bill is brought to the House, when there will be further opportunities on Second Reading and in Committee. Before I bring the Bill to the House we will listen to what Members on both sides of the House have to say, which is why I issued the consultation paper in advance. We want accessibility but we must have security, too.

Coroner Service

19. **Vera Baird** (Redcar) (Lab): What plans she has to reform the coroner service in England and Wales. [1906]

The Minister of State, Department for Constitutional Affairs (Ms Harriet Harman): The Government are committed to improving the coroner service, building on the work carried out by the Home Office and two distinguished, independent reviews. I am looking at the best way of taking that forward.

Vera Baird: I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend to her new job. Is she aware of the case of the Teesside coroner who, for more than seven years, had a three-figure backlog of cases? When an inquiry was ordered into him in 2003, the Lord Chancellor called the law complex, the inquiry took a year and the coroner, who was severely reprimanded, issued a press release ignoring that finding. Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that, in that important service, bereaved people on Teesside will be empowered to get a better public service?

Ms Harman: I can give my hon. and learned Friend the benefit of such an assurance. We have committed ourselves to introducing a draft coroners and death certification Bill, which, as well as providing independent scrutiny of all deaths following the Shipman inquiry, will require a better, more coherent and less fragmented coroner service and, above all, a greater focus on the bereaved.

Since coming to my responsibility in this Department, I have seen the file on the Teesside coroner, and all the work that my hon. and learned Friend has put into ensuring that her constituents who are bereaved get a good, proper response from the coroner has been very much taken on board by the Lord Chancellor. As she will know, he has reprimanded the coroner and is monitoring him carefully. Extra training has been required of that coroner and he is still under scrutiny. The point that she made on behalf of her constituents in relation to the individual coroner has been recognised, but we need to go beyond that to ensure that we have a universally good service in all constituencies.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

Select Committees

27. **Dr. Tony Wright** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): When he expects Select Committees to be established. [1941]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I am keen to get the Select Committees established before the summer recess. However, it is important that we respect the proper procedures that are being carried out by the parties represented in the House—processes that are now under way—but I repeat that I am fully committed to establishing the Select Committees as soon as possible, and every effort is being made to do so.

Dr. Wright: My right hon. Friend has rightly said recently that he wants Parliament to have more respect. May I suggest to him that the bit of Parliament that does command respect is our Select Committee system, but what does not command respect is that setting up those Committees is the last thing that we do at the beginning of a new Parliament, rather than the first thing? Instead of saying something general about such things happening before the summer recess, will he tell us by what date we will get the show on the road? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that my hon. Friend hears the support for his request that he gets from Opposition Members, but it is important, as I have said already, that the appropriate procedures inside the political parties are respected. Of course, I add for the benefit of Members of the official Opposition that there has been a change since the last general election: they may have noticed that our majority is slightly less than it was before. That affects the number of Select Committee chairmanships allocated to the different parties. If Opposition Members are genuinely concerned about the establishment of the Select Committees, they will ensure that their Front Benchers make appropriate representations about which of the Select Committees they wish to chair.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I fully support the question put by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and the views so far expressed by the Leader of the House. Does he accept that, if the Select Committee structure is to have the integrity and credibility that the people of this country expect, every Select Committee should be chaired by a Back Bencher? He has been kind enough to agree to meet me, as I was the Chairman of the Procedure Committee in the last two Parliaments, but will he

discuss the possibility of merging the Modernisation Committee, currently chaired by a Cabinet Minister, and the Procedure Committee, which I had the honour of chairing in the last two Parliaments? If so, and he accepts that argument, I believe that the joint Committee would carry much greater authority, integrity and independence than the current situation.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman has appropriately declared his own interests and he declared my interest for me. That is why it is important that we should have a conversation before we reach conclusions on this important question.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows that membership of the Select Committees is one of the joys of membership of the House—indeed, it is a compensation for our general impotence—but does he accept that Select Committees would be better chosen by Back Benchers, rather than being used by the Whips as a form of patronage for the loyal and dutiful and punishment for the independent-minded?

Mr. Hoon: I do not know whether my hon. Friend has been patronised or punished, but I can tell him that the selection of places on Select Committees is rightly a matter for the political parties. If he has complaints about the way in which right hon. and hon. Members are selected, he should address them to his own political party.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that, for the past three years, the Prime Minister has been cross-examined by the Liaison Committee in July for three hours. Will he give the House an assurance that the Prime Minister will not depart for his summer holiday until that exercise in accountability has taken place in July?

Mr. Hoon: It is beyond my responsibility to determine the precise date of the Prime Minister's well-deserved summer break, but I assure the right hon. Gentleman that it is my desire to see the Liaison Committee established as soon as possible.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): May I invite the Leader of the House to make a name for himself and be the first Leader of the House to recognise that we need to repatriate to Back Benchers the power to control the business of the House? Would it not be sensible for the horse trading and negotiations about which party fills which chairmanship, and the allocation and size of each Select Committee, to be carried out by the chairman of the parliamentary Labour party, the chairman of the 1922 committee and the chairpersons of the other parties represented in the House, rather than by the Executive and the Tory Front Bench? It is illogical, as well as perverse, that the people who have a vested interest in patronage should distribute the prizes.

Mr. Hoon: If my hon. Friend is dissatisfied with his political party's method of selection, he needs to make representations to that political party.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is not only the departmental Select Committees that are not in place at the moment, but the in-house Committees and, indeed, the Standards and Privileges Committee, which might be an omission. May I ask the Leader of the House about an important aspect of the scrutiny role of Select Committees: the role of the Foreign Affairs Committee in examining the forthcoming presidency of the European Union? A less than prescient White Paper was issued in February called "Prospects for the EU in 2005", although I suspect that that will have to be somewhat rewritten. When will a new White Paper be issued and what facilities will the right hon. Gentleman put in place for the scrutiny of the Government's intentions during their presidency?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman should address his question about the timing of any future White Paper to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. As far as the establishment of Select Committees is concerned, I repeat that I want them established by the summer and the political parties involved in the process to use their best endeavours—I will use mine—to achieve that end.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Liberals have once again missed the target? The point is that the EU presidency is ongoing and, at the moment, it is in someone else's hands. I make a special plea regarding the European Scrutiny Committee. We are missing the Council meetings and one of that Committee's duties is hearing post-Council report back and taking evidence from Ministers. Can we get some speed on so that at least that Committee can perform its duty, because the EU rolls on regardless of what we do here?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend makes a good point and I repeat what I have already said to the House.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Surely one of the reasons for the delay is that, for the second Parliament running, rather to the surprise of many in the House, the Government appear to have embarked on another episode of what might be called the war of Gwyneth's seat. May I invite the Leader of the House to give a well-deserved vote of confidence to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport? I hope that she will return to that position. May I also press him on the Liaison Committee? I and many hon. Members hope that the hon. Lady and her colleagues on that Committee will have the opportunity to interview the Prime Minister before the summer recess, so will the Leader of the House give us a clear commitment that he will ensure that that can happen?

Mr. Hoon: I have already made it clear that part of the problem with establishing the Select Committees is ensuring that appropriate representations are received from Opposition parties. They are entitled to a larger share of chairmanships, but such representations still have to be made, which must necessarily depend on the outcome of negotiations between the two Front Benches. The Conservative party needs to make representations about the Select Committees that it wishes to chair.

As far as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) is concerned, she is an assiduous, hard-working and distinguished Member of the House, and long may she continue to be so.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Leader of the House for those extremely kind words, which I shall have framed. He is a very clever fella and knows that it has always been the tradition of the House that chairmanships were chosen by Select Committees themselves and that their Chairmen were always Back-Bench representatives. I hope that he will simply say to us that he will not support the idea that ex-Ministers can be parachuted in automatically because, frankly, that would be an abuse of our system.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend knows full well that there are no automatic opportunities for anyone to be Chairman of a Select Committee. However, it is important that the processes that have traditionally guided the way in which these selections are made be allowed to continue.

Oath of Allegiance

28. **Norman Baker** (Lewes) (LD): If he will bring forward proposals to review the content of the Oath of Allegiance. [1942]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I recognise that there are concerns within the House. Changing the requirement to take the Oath or a form of the Oath would, however, require primary legislation. The Government have no plans to change it, but were there a substantial body of opinion in the House in favour of change, I would be willing to discuss it with ministerial colleagues.

Norman Baker: Does the Leader of the House agree that, in the 21st century, it is somewhat anachronistic, not to say objectionable, that Members of Parliament who arrive here with a proper democratic mandate, having been elected, are not allowed to take their seats unless they have sworn an Oath of Allegiance to an unelected institution? Would not it be more appropriate in these days for an oath to be taken to follow the law, to uphold democracy and to serve one's constituents?

Mr. Hoon: I believe that I have made the hon. Gentleman a very fair offer. This was a great constitutional debate in the 19th century and I see no particular desire in the 21st century for that great constitutional debate to be repeated. But if I am wrong about that and there is a large body of opinion in the House that wishes to revisit that great constitutional debate, I will be willing to raise it with ministerial colleagues.

Points of Order

3.32 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will recall that I raised a point of order with you two weeks ago and subsequently wrote to you on the issue of the Minister replying to questions to the Advocate-General. We have lost the opportunity to have five special minutes of personal questioning of the Advocate-General, since such questions are now merged with those to the Secretary of State for Scotland. The Solicitor-General intimated to me informally that it would be her wish that a Law Officer of the Crown should reply to those questions. I wonder whether the Government have made intimations to you in that regard, and whether you would advise us as to the position.

Mr. Speaker: I have fond memories of the Advocate-General taking five minutes to answer questions—which were usually put by the hon. Lady. Question 10 on the Order Paper, which we did not reach—perhaps because some Members are too long-winded and because Ministers can take some time to reply—was a question regarding the Advocate-General, so Ministers are answering these questions, albeit not the Advocate-General personally.

Miss McIntosh: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. The point is that while the Secretary of State for Scotland and I are non-practising, we are members of the Faculty of Advocates. The Advocate-General is now in another place, so we have lost the opportunity to have a response from a fully qualified Law Officer of the Crown.

Mr. Speaker: I would say to the hon. Lady that she is here not as an advocate but as a Member of Parliament. I am glad that she has declared that interest, but the fact is that there is a Minister of the Crown answering those questions.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire) (Con): On a point of order of which I have given you notice, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware that Ministers in the Department for Constitutional Affairs—to whom I have given notice of this point of order; I am sorry that they are not here—have recently transferred to the Home Office a number of questions about alternatives to jury trial and changes to the jury system. Yet in its most recent document, the Department talks about a key issue being efficient and effective fraud trials, and goes on to say that there will be alternatives to jury trial. Can it be right for the Department to claim responsibility for an area such as trial by jury and to put out a document stating that it intends to end jury trial, but then, when the difficult questions come, to dodge them by transferring them to another Department? Should not there be consistency, Mr. Speaker? If a Government Department claims an issue, it should be prepared to answer on it.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman informed me in advance of his point of order, but I am afraid I cannot help him. "Erskine May" makes it clear that it is a long-standing, established principle that decisions on the transfer of questions rest with Ministers, not the occupant of the Chair.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. A question of mine, on the very issue that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) articulated, was accepted by the Table Office as Question 1 to the Department for Constitutional Affairs. I had checked the Cabinet Office register of Ministers' responsibilities, which showed that matters related to juries fell within the responsibility of the Minister of State at that Department, who is sadly no longer in her place. As my question was accepted by the Table Office and, according to the list of responsibilities provided for Members, fell within the responsibility of that Minister, is it not wrong, and discourteous not only to myself as a Member but to the House, that it was transferred at a later date to another Department?

Mr. Speaker: That has happened to every hon. Member from time to time, including myself when I was a Back Bencher. The acceptance of a question in the Table Office does not mean that the matter ends there. A Minister is entitled to transfer that question. That is all I can say to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will have heard the exchanges earlier and the strong support for the early re-establishment of Select Committees. Is there anything that you can do to add to that pressure on the Leader of the House and others, because it would at least enable the Constitutional Affairs Committee to ensure that such questions are answered by Ministers from that Department?

Mr. Speaker: I do not want to get drawn into that argument.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Will you therefore use your influence on the Government to persuade them to bring out at an early stage a comprehensive list of ministerial responsibilities, at least to try to minimise the problem described? You cannot prevent Ministers from dodging questions and shuffling them off to someone else, but you can surely use your very considerable influence on the Government and oblige them to help Members of the House so that we know who is responsible—allegedly—for what.

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is always good at solving problems for the Speaker. I undertake to do that and to use my influence.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I was lucky enough, and rather chuffed, to have question 3 to the Department for Constitutional Affairs, on the same subject. Naturally, I accept what you said. However, the first I knew of the fact that my question would not be called today was when I saw the Order Paper on Monday. I had no correspondence whatever from the

[Mike Penning]

Minister or the Department, and I would have liked to know before I came into the House that my question was not to be called.

Mr. Speaker: The Officers of the House will look into that matter. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it.

Mr. Heald: On a separate point of order, Mr. Speaker. Does there need to be no consistency at all? In other words, if a Minister decides one day, "Oh, I don't fancy that question on jury trial," he or she can simply transfer it for the Home Secretary to deal with, while on another day—as today—the Minister can decide, "That looks like a plum question. I'll answer that one."

Mr. Speaker: That is why I welcomed the point of order raised by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). I will look into the matter and take up his suggestion.

Orders of the Day

Finance Bill

Order for Second Reading Read.

3.39 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor outlined in the Budget debate in March, we now have a foundation of fiscal strength, enabled by our decision in 1997 radically to reduce national debt. We have the lowest debt interest payments for a century, matched by the lowest unemployment costs for a generation. As the Chancellor pointed out, social security bills for unemployment have been halved since 1997, saving another £5 billion a year, and inflation has been 3 per cent. or less annually for the past eight years, making Britain's the least volatile and most stable of all major industrialised economies. We therefore have sound foundations on which to face up to global challenges and provide domestic success, and a record of macro-economic stability that lets us invest in the future.

The Bill and the measures contained therein reflect the Government's ongoing determination to ensure that our tax system is fair and competitive. Only last September, the World Bank ranked the UK first in Europe and seventh in the top 20 countries in which to conduct business. Before that, in January, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ranked our economic and administrative regulations as among the lowest in the OECD.

Looking forward, and faced with the accelerating pace of technological change and the rapid expansion of global competition, it is clear that our economic future cannot be founded on low-skilled, low-tech enterprises. That is why we must focus on establishing British leadership in skills, science and the knowledge economy, and on evolving a sensible, flexible fiscal framework that supports business as we face world competition.

It is against that backdrop that we introduce this Finance Bill containing the legislation announced in the last Budget statement which, owing to the election and following negotiations with the Opposition, was not enacted in the Finance Act 2005. Our aim is to support and encourage business as it tackles global economic challenges. Our underlying philosophy is both to produce fair taxation—thus reducing avoidance of taxation, which is not appropriate in a modern, fair economy—and to simplify the business environment to ensure clear, dependable and fair interaction with the state.

Before I discuss the individual elements of the Bill, let me inform the House that the committal motion on the Order Paper has been changed, at the request of the Opposition. The revised version is now available in the Vote Office.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady confirm that we are to add 159 pages to the 203 pages of legislation that we passed only two months ago? Might there not be a better way of supporting business than passing one page of tax legislation for every day of the year?

Dawn Primarolo: I know that, as a distinguished member of the Treasury Committee—no doubt he is

keen to be reappointed—the hon. Gentleman follows these matters closely. So he knows that the full Budget and the full Finance Bill were announced before the general election and that all the Budget resolutions were passed by the House—not one was opposed. In that Budget, the balance was struck between facilitating business and removing unnecessary regulation and acting on behalf of taxpayers who comply with their responsibilities. Our aim is to make sure that avoidance—with which a substantial part of the Bill before us deals—is prevented and that tax due is paid.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I agree that we have a strong economy, especially compared with those of the eurozone. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the main reason for that is that we have sustained good consumer demand by implementing appropriate fiscal and monetary policies, which would not be permitted inside the eurozone? Will she commit herself to continuing those strong policies to keep our economy going as it is?

Dawn Primarolo: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be delighted to hear that my hon. Friend supports his fiscal rules and stewardship of the economy, which does not surprise me given the success that these policies have produced in constituencies such as his and mine in achieving a massive reduction in unemployment.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Working on the principle that one ought to be grateful for small mercies, perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) ought to be relieved that, this year, the Finance Bill does not amount to the 488 pages represented by a previous Finance Bill that the Chancellor introduced. Will the Paymaster General tell me whether the principle of reform of the regulatory process, on which the Chancellor has rightly spoken recently, has in any way informed the construction of this Bill?

Dawn Primarolo: I know that the hon. Gentleman follows these matters closely. Perhaps he will allow me to continue making my speech, so that I can illustrate which parts of the Bill he will be ecstatic about on the basis that they will reduce regulation and make changes within the tax system to assist the processes that businesses enable. He will be able to identify a number of clauses that will do that. If he has the time to sit on the Finance Bill Committee, I am sure that we will all benefit further from his incisive analysis of the matters before us.

Let me now turn to some of the individual components of the Bill. I shall begin with VAT avoidance. I know that hon. Members will agree that, for a tax system to be effective, everyone must pay their fair share of taxes and receive the reliefs to which they are entitled. We are fully committed to combating all forms of tax avoidance, including VAT avoidance. Indeed, we have introduced a compliance strategy specifically to target the VAT gap, which has been discussed in the House before.

There are concrete measures in the Bill that will help to combat VAT avoidance. They include legislation in clause 1 that will enable Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to combat avoidance schemes that abuse UK customs warehousing rules. Clause 3 will extend the provisions dealing with "unjust enrichment" so that no business will unfairly benefit from charging too much VAT. The disclosure rules introduced in the 2004 Budget, which were debated in the House, require promoters and users of certain avoidance schemes and arrangements to provide information to the revenue Departments. Much of that information has been translated into this Finance Bill to close down active avoidance schemes. So, following the announcement made in the 2005 Budget, clause 6 and schedule 1 will extend the disclosure rules to encompass two new listed VAT schemes and a new hallmark.

Secondly, on gift aid, recent events have demonstrated the generosity of the British people in donating in times of need, and the use of gift aid by charities and donors has grown considerably. For example, £586 million of tax was repaid to charities on gift aid donations in 2003–04. That is why we have included clause 11, which will amend existing gift aid legislation in relation to admissions. The hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) might wish to take note of that proposal, which will assist business and make the rules simpler. The measure will clarify the circumstances in which gift aid will apply when free admission is given in return for a donation. Crucially, this amendment will uphold the core principle of gift aid in generating new and additional giving, and it will broaden the types of charities that can benefit.

Thirdly, on scientific research organisations, the Government are committed to enabling Britain to achieve its full potential. However, as global restructuring continues, advanced industrial nations are moving away from low-skill, low-tech products and processes, and focusing closely on technology, science, research and development.

Britain will continue to enjoy its competitive edge only if we develop world leadership in the most technologically intensive and science-based industries and services. In last summer's spending review, the Chancellor set out our 10-year plan for science. That includes a new and stretching target to increase UK investment in both private and public sector research and development from 1.9 per cent. of national income to 2.5 per cent. in 10 years' time. Clauses 13 to 15 present measures to help foster the wider benefits that scientific research organisations can provide to our economy and business. They will update the exemptions for scientific research organisations, enabling them to widen their activities and undertake a broader range of research and development.

Fourthly—and turning to financial measures—I am sure that the House will be happy to join me in recognising the vital role played by the City and the financial sector across Britain in driving forward our economy. Professionally managed, well communicated and diverse financial services support our economic growth and are key to our continued prosperity. That is why we have been keen to tackle issues from improved financial inclusion to the workings of the investment chain. As part of the package of reforms of the tax system for authorised investment funds, this Finance Bill includes powers to rationalise the legislation that applies to those funds. Clause 16 specifies a reduced rate of corporation tax of 20 per cent. that will apply to open-

[Dawn Primarolo]

ended investment companies, ensuring that they are subject to the same treatment as authorised unit trusts. In addition, clauses 17 to 19 introduce powers to change regulations and are designed to facilitate a more flexible approach to investment strategies.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): Has the Minister had the opportunity to reflect on Government proposals to extend self-invested personal pensions to residential properties from April next year? Is she aware of the tidal wave of interest in moving money in that direction and of the impact that that will have on tax avoidance and the availability of affordable housing in constituencies such as mine, which already have high levels of second and holiday homes?

Dawn Primarolo: I am certainly aware of the press speculation pointing to the sort of trends that the hon. Gentleman identifies, but the pension schemes that use property as part of a pension fund are very tightly controlled. Only 50 per cent. of the current value of the pension fund can be raised as a loan to fund a property purchase. The property becomes an asset of the pension fund, and there is a requirement to put all rental income into the pension fund and to lock it away. Any currently owned property that is placed in the pension fund is subject to the normal constraints. On maturity, when the pension fund needs to be drawn on, that property is deemed part of the pension fund and not the individual's. Therefore, much of the press speculation is based on a misunderstanding of how the clauses work. If the hon. Gentleman serves on the Committee, I am sure that by probing the clauses he will be able to assure himself and the House that that is so. However, I am following carefully the speculation and ensuring wherever I can that it is speculation and not the actual result of the proposals.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): Has the Treasury come up with its own estimate of the tax revenue that will be forgone as a result of these new measures? Standard Life has suggested something in the order of £4 billion. Can we take it from the Paymaster General's remarks that the Government have no plans to introduce any amendments on this matter during the later stages of the Bill?

Dawn Primarolo: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there are no plans for the Government to make changes to these particular provisions. I have seen the speculation about the amount that a particular organisation is suggesting. There has been correspondence with that organisation to explain to it why we believe that that figure is totally incorrect. Given the very tight controls that will exist on property transferring into a pension fund, and what happens when that property comes out of it, I do not recognise the points that are being made by that organisation. We need to be clear that this is part of—the property of—a pension fund, and the pension fund decides how it is used. Much as I pay a great deal of attention to any suggestions that this will be used as an avoidance vehicle, such suggestions are at present unfounded.

Ed Balls (Normanton) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that in Britain we now have a 10 per cent. rate of capital gains tax for long-term investments means that Britain now has one of the most attractive tax regimes for small businesses to invest and grow? Does she recall that, when that measure was first introduced in this House, Opposition Members of all parties attacked it on the ground that it would lead to tax avoidance and does she agree that, had we taken their advice, we would have denied British business and small business the real benefits that have flowed from that reform?

Dawn Primarolo: I well remember that, during the debates on the capital gains tax reforms introduced by this Government, Opposition Members forecast that it would be a disaster and would not assist in the rebalancing of the economy, particularly in relation to investment rules. They are in danger of confusing the rules on capital gains, and the very fair tax regime that exists in that regard, with the specific proposals on putting together a pension fund that enables investment to produce an income for individuals in retirement. The continual rationalisation and equalisation of those investment choices led to the changes in the pension fund.

Let me return to the specific measures on avoidance in this Bill. As I said, the Government have always made clear our determination to ensure that the tax system is fair and is seen to be fair. We have taken a series of concrete steps to prevent abuse of the tax system, and we will continue to close tax avoidance schemes as we become aware of them. Indeed, that was also the policy pursued by the previous Government. Any Government who acted fairly on behalf of the vast majority of taxpayers would pursue a policy to prevent a small number of taxpayers from receiving tax payments to which they were not entitled.

Such avoidance schemes create economic distortion, provide commercial advantage over compliant taxpayers, and redistribute tax revenues in an unfair and arbitrary manner. Therefore, in addition to the VAT measures and extension of the disclosure rules I mentioned earlier, this Finance Bill will introduce legislation to counter various forms of exploitation. That includes clauses 24 to 31 and schedule 3, which will close down schemes where companies seek to gain a UK tax advantage by exploiting differences within and between tax codes; clauses 32 to 34 and schedule 4, which prevent arrangements that enable individuals and trustees completely to avoid tax on capital gains; and clause 39 and schedule 7, which will prevent avoidance by companies and individuals using financial product-based schemes.

As announced in December 2004, this Finance Bill will also introduce legislation to close arrangements that seek to avoid or reduce income tax. Clause 12 and schedule 2 will tackle that specifically with regard to remuneration using employment-related securities—a matter to which the House, the Government and previous Governments have had to return repeatedly, to prevent this abuse. Clause 40 and schedule 8 will update the transfer pricing rules introduced by the Finance Act 1998. Those prevent parties who have a control relationship over a company from entering into transactions on a non-arm's-length basis to obtain a tax advantage. A further change ensures that the rules cannot be avoided by putting financial arrangements in

place up to six months before a control relationship exists. To counter a number of stamp duty land tax avoidance schemes, clause 49 and schedule 10 will close known loopholes: for instance, limiting artificial group relationships which have been set up purely to avoid clawback of group relief. The definition of "undertaking" will also be restricted in relation to acquisition relief to trades other than property trading, so that only genuine businesses can benefit.

The clause that I have just mentioned has been subject to some amendment, which I want to draw to the House's attention, as compared with the legislation originally presented to the House in the first Finance Bill back in March. We have listened, and amendments have been made to ensure that stamp duty land tax measures work as intended for home reversion plans, loans or deposit schemes and to ensure that group relief clawback cannot be avoided by the use of leases. There are a small number of other amendments to clauses in the Bill, which include ensuring that legislation introduced by clause 39 and schedule 7 does not affect routine arrangements concerning preference shares—another matter on which we received representations. They will ensure that other common corporate structures not set up for the purpose of avoidance are not affected. We have also extended the period of transitional protection to some companies allowed by clauses 24 to 31 and schedule 3, and we have time-limited the regulation-making power to amend a number of life assurance company tax provisions granted by clause 42 and schedule 9.

In addition to those and other minor technical changes, the Bill includes a new clause and schedule—clause 37 and schedule 6—which were not included in the previous Bill. Those make amendments to the international accounting standards legislation in the most recent Finance Act, again responding to representations: in this case, that legislation would inhibit commercial restructuring.

To conclude this summary of the Bill, let me mention the further international measures introduced by clauses 51 to 65. Those make changes to legislation that will give certainty regarding the tax treatment of some transactions involving new European companies, particularly when they are formed by merger. They will also enable UK businesses to take advantage of this new type of corporate vehicle, if they so wish.

The Budget laid down measures that enable our country to respond to and meet the challenges of a changing society facing a competitive global economy. This second Finance Bill will enact legislation that ensures fair taxation by reducing avoidance, simplifying regulation and supporting important actions such as gift aid. I commend the Bill—

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Bercow: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I was on my last sentence, but I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Winnick: The measures mentioned by my right hon. Friend will be very much welcomed by Labour Members. On the tax credit system, however—which has benefited many people and could only have been introduced by a Labour Government—in view of the constant mistakes and overpayments that cause difficulties to many constituents, and certainly mine, will she promise that she will examine the workings of the Preston office and see what can be done to improve administrative arrangements and minimise those difficulties?

Dawn Primarolo: Tax credits are not the subject of this debate, but there was an excellent debate about them in Westminster Hall this morning to which Members from all parts of the House contributed. If, after reading the transcript of that debate, my hon. Friend feels that my attention needs to be drawn to any further issues, I shall be more than happy to listen to him.

John Bercow: Will the Paymaster General give way just once more?

Dawn Primarolo: I think I will end my speech now. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.5 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I draw the House's attention my entry in the Register of Members' Interests.

I congratulate the Paymaster General on her presentation of the Bill. This is the first time since Labour came to power that a Finance Bill has not been presented by the Chief Secretary. He is presumably in Luxembourg trying to save the rebate, something of rather more significance to the Exchequer than the measures that we are discussing.

As the Paymaster General acknowledged, the Bill consists largely of anti-avoidance clauses that were excluded from the truncated pre-election Finance Bill on grounds of complexity and the need for more detailed scrutiny. Since then, the Government have made a number of minor changes, which we welcome as far as they go and which vindicate our decision not to allow such complex legislation to go through on the nod. On key issues, however, major concerns remain.

Let me say at the outset that Conservative Members recognise the need for the Government continually to address tax avoidance and the racier forms of tax planning in order to protect the Exchequer, although it would probably help if the Treasury started with a bit of housekeeping at home and tried to avoid giving away £2 billion of overpaid tax credits. Many of the tax avoidance opportunities themselves arise from the increasing complexity of tax legislation. Since 1997, the volume of tax statute in force has almost doubled, creating a bonanza for lawyers and tax accountants.

This is a practical issue. Tax planning is a fact of life for international business, as is tax competition between Governments. Governments everywhere face the same challenge: to reduce the loss of revenue from tax avoidance and tax planning, while ensuring that they do not weaken their international competitiveness. The right balance must be maintained between those competing objectives.

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

We understand the Chancellor's predicament. He faces a fiscal black hole, with independent commentators—including the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Item Club—all predicting that tax receipts will need to rise sharply if the golden rule is to be observed. He is in any case already projecting a hefty additional contribution from United Kingdom corporations. The Budget projections show corporation tax takes soaring from £34 billion this year to £43 billion next year—a 28 per cent. projected increase in the corporation tax burden, on the back of a growth forecast of 3 per cent. for the economy, at a time when our competitors are increasingly lowering their corporation tax rates.

We have two overarching concerns. The first is practical—we fear that the Treasury's collective judgment may have faltered under the pressure to find additional sources of revenue and the temptation to address all the avoidance schemes disclosed under the Finance Act 2004. Complex legislation is being proposed to produce additional revenues in the short term. Consultation has been limited, and the Treasury's response to some of the concerns raised has been, to say the least, rather high-handed. Assurances that wide powers will be used only narrowly in practice are no substitute for tightly drafted legislation. There remains a real possibility of inflicting damage on some of the UK's most dynamic business sectors in the medium term, and thus of damaging the UK economy's international competitiveness in the long term.

A successful anti-avoidance measure must increase the tax take while neither adversely affecting transactions not primarily designed for tax-avoidance purposes nor imposing on business a burden of compliance disproportionate to the additional revenue generated. Not all the measures in the Bill will pass those tests, and in Committee we will offer suggestions for achieving its anti-avoidance objectives without the collateral damage that the current drafting risks.

Our second overarching concern is the direction in which the Government are taking the tax code. Certainty and transparency are the hallmarks of a fair, effective and competitive tax system. A taxpayer is entitled to know with certainty—be it an individual or a multinational corporation—what he may or may not do in planning his tax affairs. He is entitled to expect that his treatment be laid down in statute, not determined by administrative fiat; he is entitled to expect that another taxpayer in similar circumstances will receive treatment similar to his; and he is entitled to be protected from retrospective or retroactive legislation.

There can be no doubt that this Bill carries us further down the path away from that ideal in several key respects: by giving powers that ought to be exercised by Parliament to officials, so that Revenue guidance will determine how much of the complex corporate anti-avoidance legislation works in practice, and by the use of retroaction not just back to the date of a press release—it is bad enough, but perhaps fitting, that a Government who govern by spin have determined to legislate by press release—but back even further, fundamentally altering the future commercial outcome of arrangements entered into perfectly legally, and sometimes, as in the case of the venture capital industry, with the active endorsement of the Treasury. In so doing, the Bill introduces an arbitrariness that undermines the fairness and predictability that are essential elements of an effective tax system.

John Bercow: My hon. Friend will recall, probably very accurately, the many racy and intoxicating debates that took place on the Floor of this Chamber in each of the last two Parliaments—to name but two—on the tax simplification rewrite project. He will also recall that the Paymaster General has never accepted a link, in theory or in practice, between the project and the potential implications for the composition of Finance Bills. Does he think it time that the Paymaster General accepted that there should be a link between the two, and that unless and until we reduce the size of Finance Bills we will be effectively ensuring that wealth is redistributed in favour of large businesses that can pay for specialist tax advice, and against small businesses that cannot?

Mr. Hammond: I suspect that the actual outcome is that wealth is redistributed in favour of specialist lawyers and accountants, who benefit in proportion to the tax code's size and complexity. The Paymaster General will have heard what my hon. Friend said. I rather suspect that I am intruding into a long-running private debate between the two of them. I am sure that she will respond in due course, or perhaps the Financial Secretary will do so.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is espousing some principles and arguing that, in a sense, the Bill offends them. Can he put some flesh on the bones and give actual examples that we can get our teeth into concerning the need for certainty and the use of excessive regulatory powers?

Mr. Hammond: If the hon. Gentleman, who will perhaps be a member of the Standing Committee scrutinising this Bill, will bear with me, I am about to come to some of the Bill's specific provisions.

Part 1 deals with VAT and, as far as it goes, is largely uncontroversial. I say as far as it goes, because one of the surprises is that the Bill does not contain more VAT anti-avoidance legislation. More than 700 VAT-avoidance schemes have been disclosed under the regime introduced last year, but the Government seem unwilling or unable to address them, presumably because of the involvement of EU institutions, particularly the European Court of Justice, in the interpretation of VAT rules. If the Government have lost the ability to take measures against VAT avoidance and, depending on the outcome of the Marks and Spencer case, which is currently before the European Court of Justice, against the loss of supposedly red-lined direct tax, where intra-EU losses are involved, that is grim news for domestic direct taxpayers, who will find that the Government's hunger for revenue is focused upon them.

The disclosure regime, which is being extended by part 1, is a significant burden on business and will increase with the proposals. We will seek an assurance from the Paymaster General during the Committee stage that there is a point to the extension of the disclosure regime and, indeed, to the continuation of the

VAT disclosure regime. If business has to incur the cost and burden of disclosing, we must know that the Government have the will and the ability to deal with what is disclosed.

Dawn Primarolo: It is about deterrence.

Mr. Hammond: The Paymaster General has been notified of more than 700 avoidance schemes that are in use, yet nothing in the Bill shuts down any of them.

While I am on the subject of the ECJ, experts are sceptical whether a number of other provisions in the Bill comply with the United Kingdom's treaty obligations. Perhaps the Financial Secretary will, in his winding-up speech, confirm that the Government have clear legal advice that clause 32, relating to chargeable gains of temporary non-residents, the anti-avoidance provisions of clauses 43 and 44, relating to double taxation relief, and the provisions of part 4 implementing the European company statute are all compatible with our treaty obligations and cannot be struck down by the European Court of Justice. The consensus of expert opinion outside the Treasury is not confident on that point, just as the consensus of expert opinion outside the Treasury seems to believe, unlike the Treasury, that the Revenue is likely to lose the Marks and Spencer case.

I want to touch briefly on clause 11, the gift aid clause, if only because it acts as a timely reminder that tax planning opportunities are open to all taxpayers, not only corporate giants and city whiz kids. The clause addresses the loophole in the gift aid scheme that has allowed many charities charging admission to museums or heritage sites to dress up those charges as gift aid donations. I readily accept that that was not the original intention of the gift aid scheme. However, the House will recognise that the proposed changes will impact on a significant number of charities, some of which are competing on a very uneven playing field against Government grant-aided museums that are able to offer free admission. What is the Government's estimate of the net revenue effect of that measure? The concern remains that some charities may be significantly affected and even that some small museums may have to close as a result of the loss of revenue resulting from the closure of that tax loophole.

Clause 12 deals with employment-related securities and provides us with an example of the risk of unintended consequences. The Government are rightly determined to close tax planning that reduces PAYE and NIC charges on salaries. There is no doubt that employment-related securities have been used to avoid tax and national insurance contributions, particularly on bonus payments. However, I hope that the Paymaster General will acknowledge that employment-related securities are also an important tool in seeking to align managers and staff in a business with the interests of the shareholders.

Let us not throw the baby out with the bath water. The proposed regime gives such wide discretion to the Revenue that, although the Government have said that this widely drafted legislation will be applied only to blatant avoidance schemes, employers may shy away from issuing securities to employees where there is any risk that they could be held liable for failing to account for PAYE and national insurance contributions that the Revenue determines, at a later date, should have been paid. That would be a great pity and a potential loss of competitive advantage to Britain.

Clauses 16 to 23 deal with the taxation of authorised investment funds and introduce a series of minor but burdensome changes, as well as paving the way for future changes to legislation affecting the taxation of authorised investment trusts to be done by regulation rather than by primary legislation. Will the Financial Secretary tell the House whether it is now envisaged that the proposed major reform of the taxation of authorised investment funds will be implemented by regulations? Fund management is a major UK industry and one in which we enjoy considerable competitive advantage. Changes affecting such a significant and tax-sensitive industry should be made by primary legislation, not by regulations. I hope that the Financial Secretary will reassure the House on that matter later this evening.

Chapter 4, which deals with tax arbitrage, remains one of the most controversial and complex areas of the Bill. While attacking tax avoidance, this group of clauses raises significant concerns because of its wide scope and the substantial new Inland Revenue discretions that it introduces, with consequent substantial uncertainty for both UK multinationals investing abroad and inward investors. So-called hybrids, which are at the root of the tax arbitrage targeted by these provisions, are extensively used in international financing arrangements. Experts tell us that much of the interest paid on many billions of pounds of debt, funding US corporate investment in the UK—almost all of which is arranged through some kind of hybrid entity—is vulnerable to being disallowed by a notice issued by the Revenue under clause 28.

It is far from clear to us that the Government have made any assessment of the longer-term effects of that measure. Multinational corporations will reorganise their affairs in response. Will the UK, seeking to act as the world's policeman on hybrid entities, actually bring about revenue gains for the UK Exchequer in the long term through this measure, or will multinational corporations simply rearrange their affairs so that tax authorities in other jurisdictions benefit at the expense of UK investors?

These provisions are not simply anti-avoidance measures: they introduce wide-ranging and arbitrary new Revenue powers to determine tax liability by the issuing of a notice, even when the Revenue believes only that avoidance "may" be occurring. The Government will be aware of the extent to which the draft legislation unsettled US investors in Britain. The operation of this chapter will have significant consequences for competitiveness, both through revenue raising and through the uncertainty that it will create. If it is not to damage British business, it will require a detailed review in Committee and a tightening of its scope and of the proposed enforcement procedure.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): My hon. Friend is raising an important point. If this degree of discretion is to be granted to the tax authorities, is it not essential that the Government guarantee that any taxpayers seeking clearance of any set of proposals before they are introduced will gain tax certainty by

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

securing such a clearance from the tax authorities? They will then know precisely what the tax consequences of any measures will be before they are introduced.

Mr. Hammond: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As he knows, many jurisdictions already have general anti-avoidance regimes—some of the provisions in the Bill are so widely drawn that it looks as though we are moving in that direction—but they typically have strong pre-clearance regimes, which allow taxpayers to establish their position precisely and with a statutorily protected degree of certainty. That is certainly one of the issues that we shall want to explore in Committee. If taxpayers are to be subject to the wide discretionary powers that are proposed not only in relation to tax arbitrage but in other parts of the Bill, the provisions will have to be matched with a strong pre-clearance regime to give taxpayers real certainty over a defined period of time that is not left to the Revenue's discretion.

I come now to clause 39, which introduces schedule 7. It is an anti-avoidance measure, as the Paymaster General said, aimed at complex financial instruments, and it is largely a response to schemes that have come to the Revenue's attention through the disclosure rules introduced by the Finance Act 2004, which often involve attempts to convert income receipts into capital form to exploit the wide difference between capital gains tax rates and corporate income tax rates. Although some changes have been made since March, experts remain concerned that the Bill is still too wide in scope, that it is poorly and widely drafted and that it will still catch too many innocent commercial activities that it is not intended to catch.

We accept the need to address that type of sophisticated tax avoidance, but in Committee we shall want to look closely at the provisions' retroactive effect and at the powers granted to the Revenue under this schedule. We shall also seek concrete assurances that rapid action will be taken if any of the provisions, once in operation, impose additional tax liabilities on innocent commercial transactions.

Stephen Hesford (Wirral, West) (Lab): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman with care, but I am somewhat confused. On the one hand, he says that the Opposition understand what the Government are about in respect of tax avoidance, but on the other, he lists a raft of measures to which he takes exception. Will he say whether the Opposition will agree later tonight to the Bill getting a Second Reading?

Mr. Hammond: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I shall not ask my hon. Friends to vote against the Bill this evening. We accept the principle that the Government must constantly maintain their armoury against the evolution of tax avoidance and tax planning practices. However, as I said earlier, it is a question of balancing the desire to protect the revenue with the need to maintain our international business competitiveness. Our contention is that although the principles on which the Bill is based are sound, the Government have got the balance wrong in the drafting. The arbitrariness of the powers to be given to the Revenue and the wide scope of many of the provisions in the Bill have created a climate of business uncertainty. Ultimately, that damages the UK economy.

Schedule 7 is a long, detailed and incredibly complex catalogue of measures. Ten minutes with it is worth about half a dozen Mogadon tablets, so I shall not go into the detail now. However, I advise the House that we shall go into great detail when we consider the Bill in Standing Committee.

John Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hammond: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I want to make a little more progress.

Clause 40 and schedule 8 are designed to prevent businesses owned by private equity and venture capital organisations from obtaining what the Revenue regards as excessive tax deductions for loans made from overseas. Typically, in the venture capital and private equity model, the UK acquisition vehicle is funded with debt, and the tax deduction for interest on that debt shelters the corporation tax liability arising in the business acquired. There are real concerns in the City about whether the measures are based on a proper understanding of the private equity business. Moreover, there is strong resentment about how the changes have been badged as anti-avoidance, when private equity financing traditionally has followed a model agreed with the Revenue.

As drafted, the Bill will catch a wider range of transactions than the Treasury appears to have envisaged. For example, bank debt raised by acquired companies will be caught, which will increase uncertainty and inevitably affect the pricing of transactions. The provision could also catch financing structures under the private finance initiative, so I hope that the Financial Secretary will say how the proposals in clause 40 and schedule 8 are expected to affect the Government's PFI funding programme.

As a result of the proposed measures, the UK will become less attractive at a time when our European competitors are attempting to expand their share of inward private equity investment and to promote themselves as bases for private equity houses. As the British Venture Capital Association has urged the Chancellor, there is a need to reconsider the proposals in their entirety if we are not to damage an important sector of the UK economy.

Clause 42 and schedule 9 deal with life assurance companies. They have retroactive effect and have caused at least two companies to issue profit warnings. However, I am sure that the House will be more concerned about the possible impact on policyholders, including pension fundholders, who are already being clobbered by the Government's annual tax raid of £5 billion.

Disconcertingly, paragraph 3 of schedule 9 would allow a fundamental change in the way that life assurance companies are taxed, to be introduced by means of statutory instrument. This area of specialist taxation is highly complex and the agenda is being driven by one or two senior Revenue officials who, no doubt, are committed to increasing revenue yield. Perhaps they are on performance-related pay. However, they are not in the best position to balance the revenue-

raising imperative against the wider issues raised by the pensions crisis. In such a specialist area, it is difficult to be confident of effective peer review within the Revenue or, dare I say, of adequate ministerial oversight of the policy agenda.

The intention, as I understand it, is to change the treatment of income arising on certain assets within the life assurance companies' funds which, on the basis of current actuarial assessments, are deemed to be surplus to what is required for the protection of policyholders. Life assurance companies face a complex regime that taxes policyholders at 20 per cent. on the funds invested to support their life and general annuity policies and 0 per cent. on funds invested to support their pensions, and taxes profits made by shareholders of the company, quite properly, at the full corporation tax rate of 30 per cent. The Government's proposal is to insist that surplus funds are treated as shareholders' funds so that income on them is taxed at the higher rate. As we understand it at the moment, that proposal will apply, absurdly, even to mutual insurers that have no shareholders, but will still be taxed at the shareholder rate.

We accept that there is scope for tax avoidance where genuinely surplus funds are allowed to roll up at a lower rate of deduction and then potentially transferred out to the benefit of shareholders at a later date. However, the recent history of pension funds and life assurance companies in this country should lead us to be very careful about taking any short-term view as to what constitutes surplus assets that may be required to support future liabilities, and thus can be treated as shareholders' funds subject to the higher rate of tax. I hope that the Financial Secretary will acknowledge the extraordinary complexity of this area and the special dangers that arise when very few people genuinely understand the issues. I hope that he will agree that in such circumstances it is all the more important that in Committee we scrutinise the proposals in schedule 9 very carefully.

Finally, can Ministers explain why, at a time when all building societies, most banks and most investment product providers fall under the compulsory jurisdiction of the financial ombudsman service, with rules set by the Financial Services Authority, the Government propose, in clause 69, that the statutory adjudicator for national savings should be abolished in favour of the voluntary jurisdiction of the financial ombudsman service? At a time when the Chancellor's fiscal deficit means a greater role for national savings and the consequent need to enhance consumer confidence in national savings products, and at a time when other providers are increasingly subject to compulsory regimes, that seems to us like a case of, "Do as I say, not as I do" by the Government.

It will be clear to the House that the Bill deals with complex matters. There is a very real concern that a substantial share of the burden of this legislation will fall on some of the most dynamic sectors of the UK corporate economy—UK headquartered multinational groups, fast-growing venture capital and private-equity-backed businesses and UK-based investment houses. As a result of its very wide drafting, UK multinationals potentially face higher costs of investment in overseas markets than their competitors; growing UK businesses will potentially find it more difficult to attract investment by international, and particularly US-based, venture capital and private equity funds; London will potentially become a less attractive base for international investment business; and the UK will become a more expensive location for internationally mobile investment.

We recognise the anti-avoidance driver behind much of this legislation, but in Committee we must ensure that the correct balance is restored between drafting anti-avoidance legislation widely enough to ensure that it is not circumvented and maintaining a regime that is sufficiently clear, certain and fair not to deter investment in the UK or by UK businesses abroad. We cannot act as the world's policeman. If the UK Government do not like international tax practices, they must address them by negotiation and by treaty. To try to tackle them unilaterally will not solve the problem—it will simply disadvantage British business to the benefit of our competitors. However tempting the shortcut, we must maintain the distinction between Parliament making our tax laws and the Revenue enforcing them.

Since 1999, Britain's position in the international competitiveness league has fallen from fourth to 11th place. Our trade has gone from a surplus to a record deficit and a million manufacturing jobs have been lost. Productivity growth is down by a third, as is the savings ratio, and average take-home incomes for families have fallen for the first time in 15 years. At the same time, the burden of corporate tax is growing faster than the growth rate of the economy.

Back in 2001, in response to those emerging trends, the Chancellor announced his intention to make the UK tax regime more modern, more competitive and fairer, and to remove tax distortions that impact on commercial decisions. What he has delivered is a projected huge increase in the corporate tax burden in the coming year and, on top of that, a raft of widely drafted new anti-avoidance legislation which, if we are not careful, will further erode the long-term competitiveness of British business in the short-term pursuit of extra revenue to fill his fiscal black hole.

We accept the principle that there is a need constantly to update anti-avoidance legislation, but the Government do not have the balance right in the Bill. As I said to the hon. Member for Wirral, West (Stephen Hesford), I shall not ask my hon. Friends to vote against the Bill tonight, but I can tell the Paymaster General that in Committee we shall seek further to limit the scope of some of the measures, to reduce the potential for collateral damage and unintended consequences and to increase certainty for taxpayers. We shall seek to reduce the scope for arbitrary decision making by officials and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) suggested, increase the opportunity for taxpayers to achieve certainty through rigorous pre-clearance processes.

The Bill before us today is better than the one published in March, thanks to our insistence on an opportunity for further scrutiny. With a constructive engagement on both sides of the House to digest and analyse the huge volume of input from outside experts and interested parties, I hope that the Bill will be still further improved by the time it completes its parliamentary passage, to the benefit of British business as a whole.

4.37 pm

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North) (Lab): First, I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests.

While the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) was making his straightforward and fairly analytical contribution I thought that he would avoid mentioning the macro-economic background that his party articulates. I was somewhat surprised by that, as I cannot recall a debate on a Finance Bill where the official Opposition spokesperson managed to speak for 25 or 30 minutes without mentioning macro-economic policy. However, the hon. Gentleman let me down, because in the last two or three minutes of his speech he could not resist the chance to make a point about the macro-economic background, which gives me the opportunity to refer to those issues, too.

As my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General mentioned in her introduction, it is always difficult to deal with a Finance Bill after a general election. When part of a Bill is taken before the election and part afterwards, most of us forget which part has already been dealt with and which part remains, so we are indebted to the guidance notes for keeping us right on those points. But when people voted at the general election they knew what was in the first Bill.

People recognised the importance of measures that would improve the economic situation, especially the economic well-being of poorer families. After the tax changes in the first Bill, a family on £400 a week with two children was £25 a month better off. That was a telling statistic, which people understood during the general election. They also understood the provisions in that Bill about council tax assistance for pensioners. There were many other aspects, including some of the changes to the industrial context in which our manufacturers and service providers operate.

We are debating the second Bill today. Those on both Front Benches have said that it deals with a lot of complex, technical issues, but some important principles are involved, and we will consider them further in Committee. A section of part 2 that is of interest to me is formed by clauses 7 to 10, which raise the important principle of having a flexible approach to taxation on pensions. That will become an ever more important issue, which the House will have to face as the years go by. Choice and flexibility will be more important in pensions, and our tax law must reflect that, so it is right to include those clauses.

Clause 13 deals with the important principle of providing assistance to those who will invest in research and development. I have always believed that continually pressing home technical know-how and continuing to invest in future science and technology are what the core of this country's manufacturing and service industries are based on. Although small, such changes are important in establishing that principle. That is also the right thing to do.

Clauses 16 to 23 deal with the regulatory reform of various forms of investment vehicle, and it is right that the tax system should respond to changes in their structure. There is a lot of detail on which, no doubt, those who are fortunate enough—or unfortunate enough—to serve on the Standing Committee will receive many submissions from industry. Those are important clauses.

Clauses 24 to 31, in chapter 4, are also of particular interest to me, as they deal with tax arbitrage—something that has bedevilled Governments for many years in trying to achieve a fair taxation system, so that an institution or individual pays tax fairly in at least one country's tax regime. Again, it is important to deal with that issue not only to improve fairness and justice in the taxation system, but, quite frankly, as a matter of revenue raising. It is important that we get our share of revenue from economic activity that has been based in this country or has been generated by the people of this country. Those clauses are important—that is the right thing to do—and, taken together, they will have the effect of helping us to maintain high revenue, which allows us to do the things that we want to do as a nation.

As I have said, the people of this country have clearly supported the macro-economic background on which the first Bill was based. They have recognised that stable economic policies, which have led to the lowest unemployment for 30 or 40 years and the lowest interest rates, have been not only socially desirable—they have given jobs to people who previously did not have jobs—but economically essential to raise the revenue that was necessary to invest in health and education, which all hon. Members believe are important aspects of expenditure. That macro-economic context was the background to the first Bill, on which the public have already had the opportunity to express their views.

When the public know of our deliberations on the second Bill and when we have simplified, if we possibly can, some of the complexities, they will again show their support for the provisions that have been included. The public of this country want a fair and just taxation system in both the private and the corporate sectors. They want to ensure that what the law says people should pay is actually paid, and it is incumbent on all of us who deal with the Bill to ensure that that happens.

Although the hon. Gentleman was wary of entering into macro-economic policy until the last few minutes of his speech, the same wariness has not been as notable from many of his colleagues, who have argued that the Government's revenue expectations in their financial plans will not be met for several reasons, such as getting the sums wrong. I believe that the Government have taken the right approach. Governments can never be perfect in this regard because things happen that cannot be predicted at the time when plans are drawn up. However, for the past eight years the Government have tried to achieve stability in economic policy, fiscal expectation and monetary policy. They continue to do that, which will be absolutely crucial if we are to be able to continue on the course of raising revenue so that we can achieve the expenditure patterns that we all want. I was pleased that that approach was continued in the Budget and that it has been carried through into both this year's Finance Bills.

My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General would not expect me to go the whole way with her all the time—*[Laughter.]* If I thought that it would help me to rephrase that comment, I would. My right hon. Friend

would expect me to raise a cautionary note. Although plans and designs are drawn up to bring about economic stability, we all recognise that things can be blown off course. The situation in the middle east is a problem that faces that whole world. If there is political instability, it usually follows that there is economic instability, so if we do not maintain political stability throughout the middle east and Iraq, there is the danger that economic instability could flow through across the world, the effects of which one economy of 60 million would not be able to avoid. I thus urge the Government to continue to press for political solutions in the middle east and Iraq.

My second cautionary note relates to what is happening in the European Union. Political instability has been created due to the events in France and the Netherlands, so I fear that that will bounce over into economic instability. I said in the House yesterday that I welcomed my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's statement because he realised that we should not rush into anything premature on either the political or the economic agenda to deal with the situation facing us in the European Union. I am pleased that he intends to try to get as much agreement as possible to build political stability at the Council of Ministers next week, rather than trying to exploit matters on which there might be disagreement among members of the European Union.

A great onus will be laid on this nation from 1 July when we take over the European presidency. I cannot remember a more difficult time at which any country has taken over the presidency—certainly in the past 25 or 30 years. The challenge will be maintaining political stability. Many economic arguments will be put that could affect the European economy and thus our economy.

There must be some change. People in France were not really voting on the detail of the constitution, but the political situation in which that constitution was put before them. They were worried about the apparent failure of the European Union to respond to the country's 10 per cent. unemployment. We will have to tackle such issues during our presidency so that we can help to contribute towards greater stability. Other EU members can probably learn from this country's success on supply-side issues and they might be prepared to consider changes, but other macro-economic issues cannot be avoided. The stability pact has not brought about success throughout the European Union. The pact has led to recession in Germany and France, and in some of the other nations. Before the votes on the constitution last week, the Germans and French recognised this point and minor changes were made to the stability pact in March this year. I believe that there is a responsibility on our Government to take forward those discussions during the presidency and to look at how changes might be made to the pact so that it brings greater stability to the other economies in Europe. Without that, I fear that there could be serious repercussions for our economy.

I have said what I intended to say. There are many technical issues in the Bill and those who serve on the Committee will attend to them. There will be many submissions from interested parties. We can be thankful that the Opposition have recognised that these important changes need to be made and are demonstrating that by not voting against Second Reading this evening.

4.51 pm

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): We have had a salutary reminder from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) that the great thing about economics and finance is that everything affects everything else. I will try to be a little more focused on the Finance Bill itself but, since he has given us the invitation to talk about macro-economics, I should pay tribute to the Government, as there is no doubt that their track record on macro-economic stability is a very good one. We are all in favour of macro-economic stability, which has been the happy result of the Chancellor's granting of independence to the Bank of England and of the framework for fiscal policy that has been pursued, including the golden rule.

As for the economic record, it is worth pointing out, before Ministers allow hyperbole to get the better of them, that their record is good but not as stellar as is usually claimed. In fact, no fewer than six of the other old European Union countries have grown on average more rapidly since 1997. Embarrassingly for the Conservative party, perhaps, five of those countries are in the euro area—Finland, Ireland, Spain Greece and Luxembourg.

Unemployment is far too high across the continent and particularly in the big three economies of Germany, France and Italy. However, unemployment is primarily the result of national labour market policies, which is why its pattern varies so much from one country to another. Those countries such as our own that have embarked on the process of structural reform and have made their economies more flexible have been rewarded with a good growth record and a good fall in unemployment; a third in the case of Spain, a quarter in the case of Finland and a half in the case of Ireland since 1997.

If a little more modesty is in order on macro-economics, a good deal more modesty on micro-economics is in order. In the period since I started looking at the British economy, the boom and bust in the housing market has repeatedly been the ghost at the feast. Yet what have the Government done on the housing market? Ministers disparaged my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) when he first warned of the consequences of another house price ramp at the end of 2002. I hope that the unwinding of that boom will be less painful than the unwinding of the last one under the previous Conservative Administration, as it should be given the more stable macro-economic environment.

However, our household liabilities are now exceptionally high both by our own standards and by those of other countries; we are a nation in hock to our homes. That is lovely and warming when house prices are rising, because the effect of making tax-free capital gains with other people's money is highly gratifying. However, it is much less comforting when prices stagnate or fall, as they are now doing. That may be one explanation for the sluggishness of retail sales that has been widely reported and which may begin to have an impact on the underlying finances that we are addressing in this Bill.

Perhaps concern about the end of the feel-good boom in house prices and on the high street is one reason why the Finance Bill signally fails to correct a taxation error

[Chris Huhne]

that will come into effect on 6 April 2006 and on which the Paymaster General has provided a partial defence to criticisms. Under the provisions of self-invested personal pensions, anybody can invest their personal pension pot in a buy-to-let home and benefit from full tax relief on the money put in, up to a limit of £215,000 a year. Indeed, people can benefit from full tax relief on assets such as vintage cars, wine collections, flats purchased so that children may live in them while at university, and even what my noble Friend Lord Oakeshott of Seagrove Bay pithily described in another place as the occasional jet-to-let property in St. Jean Cap Ferrat.

Let us take the example of a successful professional person who decides to buy a £215,000 flat as part of his or her SIPP for a child to live in while at university. No less than £86,000 of the purchase price will be paid by all other taxpayers. The purchasers will be able to sell the flat on in three or four years and pay no capital gains tax because the property is held within a tax-free fund. Those provisions are a serious and imminent threat to the public finances. We will argue in Committee that there must be an amendment if there is not to be an important loss of revenue. I hear what the Paymaster General said—indeed, we should bear in mind the invitation extended by the hon. Member for Normanton (Ed Balls)—that that will not necessarily happen because of other examples of capital gains tax taper relief not coming home to roost.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman criticises an important element of the Bill. Is he against the tax break for people who invest in real estate in their pension funds, as introduced in the last Finance Bill? Presumably it is retained in this Bill, which is why we are discussing it, and I think that the provision comes into force next year. Is he against tax breaks for pension investment altogether, or does he think that there should be no tax incentive if the asset acquired in the pension fund happens to be real estate rather than some other investment?

Chris Huhne: Let me come to that. The hon. Gentleman anticipates the obvious solution that I was going to suggest at the end of my remarks on this section. Although the Paymaster General reassured us on the matter, I remind her that when my party raised similar concerns about the disadvantaged areas provision, the Treasury rapidly decided to close the loophole.

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): Does my hon. Friend share the view that a further worrying aspect of SIPPs is the likely increase in demand for a second home, particularly in rural areas, thereby fuelling the rapidly rising house prices in areas such as my constituency and pricing houses beyond the means of people on local average wages?

Chris Huhne: That will be a problem and I am not reassured by the Paymaster General's response that the Inland Revenue will make substantial checks to ensure that that does not happen. Under existing provisions, people could buy a second home—I see the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) perk up at this prospect—on the Côte d'Azur or somewhere in Croatia, for example. It beggars belief to imagine that Inland Revenue inspectors are going to be hopping on easyJet to check out whether people have used those homes themselves or are letting them out properly, which is the purpose of the exemption.

The obvious solution is not to undermine the principle of a SIPP, but to exclude the more exotic assets and to postpone the inclusion of residential property until properly constituted and regulated real estate investment trusts are available. That would allow pension funds to continue to invest in residential property, but on a similar basis to the way in which most institutional investors invest in residential property, which it is rare for them to do directly because of management issues. That is a way to close the loophole.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is wrong about institutional investors: sometimes they decide to take a direct stake in a property. By denying them the right to do so, he will both distort the market and ensure that, to get the benefit of the pension investment, people have to pass through intermediaries, who will presumably deduct fees, commission, management charges and so on. Does he really believe that it is a good idea to distort the investment market in that fashion and to tell people that, if they want a tax break, they will have to give up some of the benefit to an intermediary? We have been through that before and found it foolish, since it diverts resources from the taxpayer to financial intermediaries, rather than encouraging the taxpayer to save more, which is what we want.

Chris Huhne: I know of no institutional investors who directly manage residential property: they may own it directly, but they have an intermediary managing the property for them. However, I shall enter into correspondence with the hon. Gentleman on the subject. My understanding is that relatively little, if any, investment goes into residential property directly, as opposed to via other investment funds, so I doubt that a distortion such as he describes would be created.

Rob Marris: I understood the Paymaster General to say that the assets would be owned by the pension fund, rather than by the individual. Therefore, in the example the hon. Gentleman gives of a person who invests in a property for children at university, to fulfil their statutory obligations, the trustees of that SIPP fund would have to set the rent at the market rate. There would be no gain for the family, because the children at university would not be getting a cheap rent, but would have to pay a market rent. Where is the gain?

Chris Huhne: To be frank, the real potential is in abuse. I am not persuaded that the Inland Revenue is in a position to check, in particular because, as I understand it, the provision is open to investments in property both inside the UK and outside it, certainly throughout the European Union.

On other occasions, the Treasury's desire to tackle tax avoidance proves altogether too blunt, as seen in the provisions on authorised investment funds. The fund management industry is a small jewel in the crown of

British financial services, with some £2 trillion in assets under management in this country, third only to the United States and Japan. Moreover, it is a branch of the industry that does not need to cluster in the great financial centres, which is why there are thriving asset managements in Edinburgh as well as in London and other centres across the UK. In Committee, we will voice detailed concerns about the possible reintroduction of double taxation for some types of qualifying investor scheme, which might prove unhelpful to the objective of ensuring that Britain remains a highly competitive centre of fund management.

Wider principles are raised in the provisions on authorised investment funds. In general, it might be sensible to delegate the technical regulatory powers to the Treasury, as clause 17. At present, the AIF tax code details are mainly in primary legislation, which can be changed only annually, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said. The delegation of those enabling powers seems as sensible for us in the UK as the similar delegation of enabling powers at European level under the Lamfalussy proposals, which all the parties welcomed. However, we find in the Government's proposals none of the safeguards that became normal in European financial services legislation. There is no obligation on officials to proceed with openness and through drafts for consultation, nor any mechanism whereby Parliament can satisfy itself that such commitments to openness and consultation have been honoured.

In all European financial services legislation since the Lamfalussy report, the European Liberal Democrats have proposed—with the support of all the other parties represented in this place—a sunset clause on delegated powers, which removes them after four years. I hope that Treasury Ministers, if not their officials, can see the value of inserting such a provision in respect of the newly delegated powers. At present, there is a simple approval of new regulations by the House when they are first introduced; thereafter, revisions are subject only to the negative resolution procedure. There is no trigger point at which a general assessment of the operation of delegated powers can be undertaken, but it seems to us that there should be.

Another issue that is always a matter of concern in any Bill, and certainly in any Finance Bill, is the inclusion of retrospective provisions such as those in clause 12. I recognise that there is a hue and cry about retrospection every year, and also that retrospective tax provisions are less of an intrusion into the personal freedom of the individual than, say, retrospective criminal offences. However, retrospection is surely a sign of failure of foresight. It is representative of Treasury officials recognising that a particular tax avoidance scheme is so serious that it must be dealt with retrospectively. Surely it is better to anticipate problems than to tackle them after they have occurred. It is also surprising, given the Treasury's new powers to insist on the disclosure of schemes marketed to clients for tax avoidance, that these retrospective measures are still deemed necessary. Perhaps the Paymaster General will give some thought to encouraging her officials to keep their ears to the ground.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman has referred to quite a bit of stuff that is not actually in the Bill, so he will have difficulty referring to it in Committee. On his point on clause 12, the measures are not retrospective. If he cares to look at the history of the previous Conservative Government and this Government in dealing with this particular kind of avoidance, he will see that measures targeted at tackling such avoidance did not work. So the Government have made a clear statement that said: "This is subject to tax, and it will be paid." This has nothing to do with retrospection.

Chris Huhne: I thank the Paymaster General for that clarification, but we hope that the retrospective elements in the Bill will prove less necessary over time, as the Treasury's new powers come into greater use. It now has far fewer excuses for retrospective measures, and I hope that she will point that out to her officials.

These provisions are also typical of the Government's obsession with complexity—often, it seems, for the sake of it. When it comes to macro-economic policy, the Treasury team has constructed an edifice that is simple and strong, with clear Palladian lines. However, it seems to compensate when it comes to micro-economic matters by indulging in a wild taste for the baroque. There is scarcely a tax provision unadorned in successive Finance Bills, to such an extent that the Government must now surely be the pride and joy of the professional advisers, whose fees grow fatter every year as a result of the expense of interpreting the Treasury's latest provisions. KPMG has pointed out that, over the past eight years, the annual Finance Bill has grown in length by 35 per cent. compared with the previous eight-year period. It is not obvious, however, that outcomes are so much better for the undoubted increase in inputs.

In sum, we support the macro-economic stability that has been a feature of this Government's record to date, although we note that the international comparisons are not quite as favourable to the Government as those on their Front Bench would have us believe. However, we have serious reservations about the omission from the Bill of measures on tax avoidance, particularly concerning self-invested pensions, that we shall seek to address. We also have reservations about the provisions on asset management, and about the checks and balances necessary to delegate powers to the Treasury in that respect. Finally, in approaching these measures, we shall attempt to ensure that simplicity is the watchword.

5.8 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport, East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate. I represent with great pride the constituency of Newport, East, and I would like to express my thanks to the people of the constituency who have sent me here. I have heard rumours that hon. Members sometimes have difficulty in paying tribute to their predecessors. I am sure that that is not true, but I have no such problem. Despite the fact that my immediate predecessor originally came to the House as a Tory, I know Alan Howarth very well and I know of his diligence and his ability. During the election campaign, the people of Newport, East told me time and again of his determination and effectiveness in tackling their problems. He was also, of course, a splendid Minister in several Departments who left a lasting legacy in the shape of his contribution to widening access to higher education, to the arts, to developing disabled people's rights and to building a national child care strategy.

[Jessica Morden]

I mentioned that Alan started out as a Tory—as the Conservative Member for Stratford-on-Avon. Political parties do not always react well to Floor-crossers, but it was a sense of duty and conviction that led Alan to cross the Floor in 1995. He was welcomed very warmly by the Labour party in Newport, East—no mean feat for a Conservative in south Wales. I assure hon. Members and my constituents that, although I aspire to be as good a constituency Member and parliamentarian as he, I can categorically state that I will never cross the Floor. I am so pleased that Parliament will not be losing his talent, and that I will not be losing his sage advice and experience.

I also pay tribute to Alan's predecessor, the late Lord Islwyn, who like me and Alan Howarth, made his maiden speech on Second Reading of the Finance Bill. He represented Newport for more than 30 years and, sadly, passed away in the last Parliament. I note in passing that that makes two Members for Newport, East in a row who have been elevated to the other place.

My constituency of Newport, East stands at the gateway to England and Wales—or the other way around, depending on how one looks at it. It stretches from the eastern banks of the mouth of the River Usk to the communities of Roggiett, Undy, Magor and Caldicot.

Newport has a very proud political history. It was the cradle of the Chartists and later home of the Chartist riots in 1839. The demands made by the Chartists are the principles that we now take for granted and, indeed, formed the basis of modern parliamentary democracy: universal suffrage, secret ballots, the abolition of the property qualification for Members and, of course, wages for MPs so that not only the wealthy could represent the people.

Born—surprisingly enough—as a port, Newport became in the 19th century one of the most important places in the country for coal export. Later, the steel industry made its home in Newport, at Llanwern in the Corus plant. In light of recent experience, Lord Islwyn spoke prophetically when he said in his maiden speech in 1966:

"it would . . . be tempting fate to rely so exclusively on this one form of trade."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 1966; Vol. 729, c. 503.]

When, in 2001, Corus announced the end of steel making and serious job losses at the Llanwern steelworks, many thought that the town would be devastated. Newport, East has fought back, though, because of the enduring quality of its greatest asset—the people of Newport, East, who have always shown their ability to bounce back from setbacks and difficulties, adapting and responding to changes in industry and society.

Four years is a very long time in politics and so much has changed. My constituency is now enjoying a renaissance. The word "renaissance" is easy to use; nearly every local government strategy document proclaims a local renaissance, and it might seem overly grandiose, suggesting a perfect image of 15th century Italy—a combination of economic and cultural revival—but in Newport's case, it is true. There is certainly an economic renaissance. Despite losing part of its core industries, the city is proving that it can re-establish itself as a centre of modern industry and commerce. New industry in the high-tech and financial services sector is being attracted to the constituency. That includes companies such as EADS Defence and Security Systems, which I visited during the campaign, and which is bidding for the new UK fire and rescue services communications system.

Thanks to the good relations and teamwork between the work force, management and unions, Corus reported record profits this year. Thanks to Labour teamwork in Westminster, the Assembly and on the excellent Newport council, the city is home to Wales's first regeneration company—Newport Unlimited, which is redeveloping the city centre with £30 million for jobs and development.

The renaissance is built on the strong foundation of a better skilled work force. The University of Wales in Newport, in neighbouring Newport, West, has had the largest increase in full-time undergraduate applications of any university in the United Kingdom and is one of the top UK universities for widening access to higher education for students from the state school sector. That is a signpost of bright things to come for Newport, East, but the future development that Newport needs must be as a result of commercial decisions dependent on the Government continuing to create the conditions to ensure a strong and vibrant economy in Wales. The measures in the Finance Bill, however complex and technical, will enable us to do that.

I am very proud that we have the best economic background in Wales for decades, helping a huge cross-section of people to share in the prosperity that a stable economy is providing. There are now more people in Wales in work than ever before, and unemployment in Newport, East has been halved. It is vital that we continue that growth.

Some might say that the renaissance in Newport is due to the popularity of the GLC—not the Greater London council but the Goldie Lookin' Chain, Newport's rap stars whose spiritual leader is my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn). What is certainly true is that Newport's renaissance is intimately associated with its cultural life. Thanks to the legendary club, TJ's, Newport is a cultural Mecca for the alternative music scene. It is a city with its own cultural and sporting heroes—Caldicot male voice choir, Newport Dragons rugby team, Newport County FC, the Welsh national velodrome and the sports village. Although it is just outside my patch, I am sure that my colleague in Newport, West will not mind my mentioning that I look forward to hosting the 2010 Ryder cup at the Celtic Manor. Newport was awarded city status in 2002. Some wag even suggested that with such a renaissance we should start to call Newport "new Newport", but that might be a little bit too new Labour for some.

I want to ensure that all my constituents get to share in Newport's growth. I am proud to represent a party that has done so much over the years to unlock human talent and to deliver social justice, but there is still much to do to improve people's day-to-day lives for the better. Child poverty still blights too many lives; too few people leave school without the skills and qualifications that they need to make their way in the world; there is too much antisocial behaviour, meaning that people cannot live in peace; and too many people rely on income

replacement benefits. Working with my colleagues in this place and in Newport, that is what I want to help to change.

5.16 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): The hon. Member for Newport, East (Jessica Morden) gave an extremely attractive maiden speech that was very competently delivered. We learned a lot about Newport—or I certainly did, as I did not know much about it before. Many Members on both sides of the House will appreciate the hon. Lady's kind words of tribute to her predecessor, Alan Howarth. It was a model of a maiden speech that augurs well for a new parliamentary career, and I know that we would all want to welcome her to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made an extremely well informed speech about the Bill that made me feel that I should try once again to get on to the Finance Bill Committee, because it sounds as though we will have some interesting subjects to discuss. Clearly, he could not give such a thorough account of the Bill's strengths and weaknesses and at the same time say much about macro-economics. However, that does not mean that there is not a lot that needs to be said about macro-economics, not least because the Government—I am afraid that the Paymaster General is very much in the model of her boss in this matter—continue to take a consistently self-righteous, self-congratulatory and complacent tone in everything that they say on the subject.

That is disgracefully reflected in the way in which the Red Book is drafted. The Red Book used to be regarded as something that was drafted as dispassionately as possible from a party political point of view by Treasury officials, but—I said this last year but I shall say it again as it remains true—it has increasingly become a work of political propaganda in which everything that happened before 1997 was terrible and everything that has happened since is absolutely brilliant. It is extremely difficult to find some of the essential facts that one needs because those facts, which are not flattering to the Government's performance, and any problems are skated over.

Against that background, it is important to use this debate to redress the balance—albeit slightly, because that is all that one can do in a very short space of time.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My recollection, having been a Treasury civil servant throughout the Tory years, is that Tory Ministers were greatly interested in the drafting of the Red Book. Does not the hon. Gentleman recall that when Nigel Lawson was Chancellor of the Exchequer he personally decided that we should introduce into it the medium-term financial strategy? That was a direct ministerial intervention that was not in any way initiated by officials.

Mr. Davies: No, the hon. Lady must be quite wrong about that. I remember Lord Lawson, as he now is, was Chancellor of the Exchequer when I entered the House, and the medium-term financial strategy, which he had devised as a junior Treasury Minister long before I entered the House, was the framework for economic policy at that time—a very successful framework. It would therefore have been extraordinary to have drafted the Red Book without making reference to the medium-term strategy—rather like drafting the Red Book now without reference to the golden rule or the sustainable investment rule, and I certainly do not protest that those two things are dealt with in the Red Book.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk) (Con): I do not recall Lord Lawson double and treble-counting the figures for the first two or three years when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, unlike the present incumbent.

Mr. Davies: I think that standards in these matters have slipped and eroded, which is unfortunate. Were we to go back to the time of Sir Stafford Cripps, we would find that he adopted a more severe approach—not a more successful approach to the management of the economy—to the presentation of the facts in the documents produced in the Treasury.

A lot is right about the economy: of course, it has been doing well, although not so well since 1997, in terms of growth, as between 1992 and 1997—one would not learn that from reading the Red Book, but it is a fact. Nevertheless, the British economy has some favourable aspects currently, but also some worrying features, which also need to be discussed and addressed. I want the Government to be reminded of them and forced from time to time to address them.

First, the Chancellor is showing increasing signs of losing control of public expenditure. Those are strong words, but let us examine public expenditure as a proportion of GDP. In 1997, when this Government took office, public expenditure stood at 39 per cent. of GDP. It then fell, because, as we all know, the Chancellor continued with Conservative projections for the growth of public spending in the first two years, to 37.3 per cent. of GDP in 1999–2000. That was a favourable fall. It has now risen to 41 per cent. of GDP, and is projected to rise to 42 per cent. next year. That is a rise of five percentage points in five years, which is quite worrying. What will he do for an encore? Will it rise another five per cent. in another five years, which will be a rise of 10 per cent. over 10 years? It cannot continue rising indefinitely or we will have a major economic headache. The Government should address that sort of issue, and not try to bury it. Incidentally, I did not get those figures from the Red Book; I had to find them elsewhere, as they are not in it—I wonder why.

Rob Marris: May I refer the hon. Gentleman to the table on page 275 of the Red Book, which gives those figures? It also shows that in 1982–83, the figure was 42.7 per cent., in 1983–84, 42.3 per cent., in 1984–85, 42.6 per cent., in 1985–86, 41 per cent., and in 1986–87, 40 per cent. Need I go on?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is partially correct, but I repeat my point: curiously, those figures do not go up to last year. Therefore, he will look in vain in the Red Book for the figures that I quoted for the previous year, 2004–05, and the estimate for next year, 2005–06, of 41 per cent. or 42 per cent. They are not there, and I wonder why, as the House of Commons Library was able to find them for me based on the Treasury's figures.

Rob Marris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I will proceed for a little longer before I give way again. I will no doubt do so later, but I do not want the whole of my speech to be taken up by the hon. Gentleman, who, I am sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be able to catch your eye in due time.

Secondly, the Government are losing control over the current budget deficit, about which the Government's projections have been proved wrong successively. I will quote from the Red Book, for those who do not want to read it, to give the flavour of the complacent and potentially deceptive way in which it is sometimes drafted. Paragraph 2.39, on page 27, states

"The estimated 2004–05 outturn for public sector net borrowing is £34.4 billion, compared with £34.2 billion projected in the 2004 Pre-Budget Report"

—six months ago—

"and £32.9 billion projected in Budget 2004"

—a year ago.

Those figures seem very close. Anyone reading that would say "It is fine. Everything is under control. The outcome is almost exactly what was predicted six months ago and a year ago." Let me read on, however.

"For the public sector current budget, the estimated 2004–05 outturn shows a deficit of £16.1 billion compared with projected deficits of £12.5 billion and £10.5 billion in the 2004 Pre-Budget Report and Budget 2004 respectively."

In other words, over the last six months the Treasury's prediction of the current deficit has risen from £12.5 billion to £16.1 billion, and over a year it has risen from £10.5 billion to £16.1 billion. That means that in six months there has been an increase of a third in the estimated outturn for the deficit, and over the last year an increase of a good deal more than 50 per cent.

All well-run businesses make forecasts. If a business's forecast was found to be out by a factor of 50 per cent. every year, questions would be asked and answers required. There is no doubt that there is a series of instances of the Treasury's missing its forecast.

Rob Marris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again immediately. He will have to be patient. I will develop my argument, if I may.

The other curious aspect is this. How is it possible, within the general figure for the Government's deficit—which is roughly the same as that predicted a year ago and in November—for the current deficit to have increased so much? The answer must be that investment spending has been cut. The Government have said "My goodness, it will be terribly embarrassing if we breach our forecasts, and the budget deficit is much greater than was anticipated only six months ago. Since the current element of the budget is out of control, we will have to compensate by cutting investment spending." I think that that is confirmed in the table on page 30 of the Red Book:

"Forecasting changes to net investment . . . -3.4".

The Chancellor is doing something that he always said he would never do. He is doing something that he accuses previous Governments, Labour and Conservative, of doing: playing around with investment spending, and using it as a cushion to absorb mistakes made in the management of current spending. Again, I fear that the full story is not clear. It is certainly not clear from the Red Book. If the Paymaster General wishes to intervene, I shall certainly give way. I hope that she will have an explanation for the House in due course. *[Interruption.]* The Paymaster General's sedentary intervention may have been very significant, and the House would probably like to know what it was, but I did not hear it.

Dawn Primarolo: I recommend the hon. Gentleman to read the Red Book before speaking in debates such as this.

Mr. Davies: The Paymaster General will have to be more specific, and say which of the figures relating to the current budget or the total budget was quoted wrongly. She will be able to compare *Hansard* with the Red Book, and she will find that I quoted the Red Book precisely. What is more, she has not explained why the Government missed their forecast. We should be extremely interested to know the explanation. Some modesty or humility on the Government's part—some explanation when things go wrong, rather than an attempt to brush under the carpet everything that is not entirely favourable—would be very welcome.

Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman might find some explanation on page 27 of the Red Book. I shall read out the second part of the quotation that he gave us, and then continue with the rest of the paragraph. This is what the hon. Gentleman quoted:

"For the public sector current budget, the estimated 2004–05 outturn shows a deficit of £16.1 billion compared with projected deficits of £12.5 billion and £10.5 billion in the 2004 Pre-Budget Report and Budget 2004 respectively."

The hon. Gentleman ended the quotation there, but the passage continues

"This is significantly lower than the deficit on the public sector current budget of £20.4 billion in 2003–04 as the impact of the strengthening economy has fed through to receipts. On the basis of cautious, audited assumptions, the Government is meeting its strict fiscal rules over the economic cycle."

Offering selective quotations is not helpful, and nor is comparing apples with oranges—comparing projected out-turns with actual ones—and not specifying the difference.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman has just read out a completely irrelevant quotation. I asked why the Government missed so badly the forecast for this year's deficit, and the hon. Gentleman proceeded to read out a passage about the deficit for the financial year 2003–04 having been greater than that for 2004–05. I shall not make the mistake of giving way to him again, because that has not advanced the argument at all. He was clearly engaged in an exercise of obfuscation, perhaps in order to defend his right hon. Friend the Paymaster General.

There is a third big question-mark over the direction in which the Government's management of the country's finances is going; indeed, it has been discussed quite a lot recently. Is the Chancellor about to face the dilemma of breaching his golden rule? Will he have to put up taxes or cut spending? The jury is still out on this issue, and I shall not go into it in detail as it has been well

aired in recent public debate. All independent forecasters are considerably pessimistic about the Government's chances of meeting the golden rule and balancing the current budget through the cycle, given that it is supposed to finish at the end of next year without recourse to further taxes.

This is an important issue not so much because of the potentially severe economic impact of breaching the golden rule or of increasing taxes—we would all very much regret such increases—but because the damage to the Government's credibility would be enormous. We would realise not only that the Chancellor had missed a whole series of forecasts, but that at the end of the cycle, he had failed to observe his own rule. He started out with the immensely ambitious plan of more than meeting the golden rule—of having a surplus over the whole cycle of more than £100 billion.

Rob Marris *indicated assent.*

Mr. Davies: I see that the hon. Gentleman is nodding. To move from a £100 billion surplus to the current break-even situation, with the possibility of going below the waterline and missing the golden rule altogether, is a significant turnaround.

Something more profound needs to be said about the Government's golden rule and sustainable investment rule, which I welcome in theory. They are right in principle and conceptually, but the question is whether they are being applied effectively, or so loosely that they do not represent the rigorous economic discipline that they purport to represent. If the latter is so, that is very dangerous for the long-term performance of the British economy and—once the cat is out of the bag—for the credibility of its management.

The golden rule says that the current budget must be balanced through the cycle. That involves a number of assumptions in deciding what the cycle is, which I shall not go into, but one's immediate reaction is that under such a rule, if the economy is growing above trend, the Government will be running a surplus, and if it is growing below trend, they will be running a deficit. So reduction in demand during a downturn is compensated by greater Government spending, and vice versa. That is the classic use of fiscal policy for stabilisation, but one need only look at what has happened since 1997 to see that it is not the golden rule on which this Chancellor bases his economic management.

When the economy was growing above trend in the late 1990s, public spending was growing at slightly less than the trend rate of the growth of the economy, which was 2.5 per cent. Then, when an election was about to be held in 2000, the Government suddenly took off the brakes, having been very fiscally prudent until then, and projected annual rates of expenditure growth of 3.2 to 3.5 per cent.—way above the economy's trend growth rate of 2.5 per cent.

Last year, the year before and this year, growth in the economy was significantly above the trend rate: 3.1 per cent., 3 per cent. and 3 to 3.5 per cent.—that is the projection for the current financial year in the Red Book. Nevertheless, there were substantial deficits. That must be contrary to any normal understanding of the golden rule. However, the Chancellor does not have a normal understanding of the golden rule. His definition of it is different: if we have had surpluses earlier on within the cycle, we can draw on those later and run up whatever deficits we like. As long as, when we get to the end of the cycle—whatever we decide is the end of the cycle—we have not drawn down all those surpluses, we balance the current budget through the cycle.

That is simply not good enough for several reasons. The first is that we never know when the end of the cycle is, so it is a pretty irresponsible way to manage the economy. We do not know over how many years to come we will still have, in practice, those accumulated surpluses to spend. We may think that the cycle will come back to the trend rate of growth at the end of 2005, but we may be wrong about that. No one knows, so that is not a responsible policy.

The Government have not properly focused on the other big problem with that approach to the golden rule. If the golden rule is taken to be—I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not feeling very well this afternoon. I think I may have to interrupt my speech. I am so sorry.

5.37 pm

Ms Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak for the first time in the House and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Jessica Morden). The first thing that I would like to do in the House is to thank the people of North Ayrshire and Arran, who have given me the privilege of coming here and speaking on their behalf in the Chamber.

I represent a diverse and beautiful constituency. It is almost a mini-Scotland. I have two islands in my constituency—Arran and Cumbrae—which face unique issues. I have more prosperous areas such as Largs but I also have other areas that represent the old industrial part of Scotland: Kilwinning, the three towns of Stevenston, Ardrossan and Saltcoats, and the Garnock valley. Therefore, it is a mixed constituency with proud Labour and parliamentary traditions: Keir Hardie was the miners' agent in North Ayrshire.

Like the others in Scotland, mine is a new constituency with new boundaries, so I have more than one immediate predecessor. I am lucky enough to be here today because of the retirement of Brian Wilson, who originally came from the north of Scotland. He was a radical journalist who founded the West Highland Free Press, but came to Ayrshire and used his skills on behalf of the people of Cunninghame, North, where he is well respected. He held ministerial office in this place and was a high-calibre politician.

I have other predecessors, given that Cunningham, South was also part of the new constituency. One of the people whom I must thank for the support that they have provided me over recent months is my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr. Donohoe). Another previous Member for Cunninghame, South, David Lambie—he represented that constituency for many years—has also provided me with huge support on a personal level over the previous few months. David Lambie is a pacifist, a person of strong views and someone who I know will provide me with good advice over the coming years. He continues to be involved in my constituency Labour party and the wider community in North Ayrshire and Arran.

[Ms Katy Clark]

However, perhaps the previous Labour candidate in my constituency who means most to me is my great-great grandfather, who stood twice as Labour's candidate in what was then North Ayrshire and Bute. He increased Labour's vote there twice before becoming the hon. Member for South Ayrshire. It is fair to say from everything that I have heard about my great-great grandfather that he was very much a rebel, a pacifist and a socialist. He went on to become general secretary of the Scottish National Union of Mineworkers and came to the House as a miners' MP. He always stood up for what he believed in.

My great-great grandfather was brought up in Dalry, which is in the constituency that I now represent, but when the mine there closed, he and his family walked to south Ayrshire where the mine owners were opening up a new pit. I understand that their possessions were transported by railway and that when they reached south Ayrshire, a village had been built with pit houses identical to those from which they had come. The mine owners tried to keep control over as many aspects of miners' lives as possible. It was hearing about people like Sanny Sloan, my great-great grandfather, that really brought me into politics. He was part of the landslide 1945 Labour Government, for which all hon. Members have a huge amount to be thankful in respect of the creation of the welfare state and the national health service.

As I said, my great-great grandfather was a miner, but the mines have long gone in my constituency, and in their place came many other forms of heavy industry. However, through 18 years of Tory rule, we saw industry after industry closing and my constituency has still not properly recovered from that experience.

Since 1997, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) said, much has been done to improve Scotland's and Britain's economies and much has been done to get rid of unemployment. My constituency has seen a 25 per cent. increase in employment since 1997, but the reality is that a huge amount more needs to be done. Unemployment is still too high, as is poverty, deprivation and the social problems that come with that.

From the point of view of my constituents, the most important Labour manifesto commitments in the coming years will be the commitment to full employment so that everyone has access to a job, and the commitment to eradicate child poverty, backed up with targets to eradicate that and all forms of poverty. I view my job as MP as doing all that I can on the Labour Benches to ensure that Labour implements the policies that will deliver on behalf of my constituents.

I am proud to be in my place on the Labour Benches and particularly pleased, as we move towards the G8 summit, that we have a Labour Chancellor who is leading the way in pushing the policies internationally to make poverty history. We all have an obligation to do all that we can to ensure that poverty is dealt with throughout the world. It is in none of our interests that so many people in so many countries live in such dire poverty.

I am involved in politics because I came out of a socialist tradition and because I still believe that it is possible to change the world. During my time in Parliament I intend to work as effectively as possible to represent my constituents and to put forward policies to ensure that in future the gap between rich and poor in this country is reduced. The reality is that we live in one of the richest countries in the world. Britain is the fourth richest in the world, but the gap between rich and poor remains wide. Similarly, the gap in respect of power and wealth in society is still far too great.

In representing the people of North Ayrshire and Arran, I hope to advocate policies that will ensure that future generations inherit a world that is fair and gives all of us a better chance in life. I thank the House for listening to me so courteously today.

5.45 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark). Her constituency looks 20 miles across the Irish sea at another very good constituency—mine. Her maiden speech was very interesting, as was the one made earlier by the hon. Member for Newport, East (Jessica Morden). However, the hon. Lady has more faith than I, as she said that she would never cross the House. That was what I thought when I sat over there, but then the Government changed and I had to cross the Floor. Of course, I understand that she meant something different.

It is nice to hear about the background of new hon. Members and to see the fruition of seeds sown earlier in their family history. Speaking from the Unionist Benches, I wish the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran well. Ulster and Scotland have much in common, and that applies to me more than most as my mother came from the city of Edinburgh. That means that I have a good Scots streak in me—as I am often told when things get hot in Ulster politics. Anyway, I congratulate the hon. Lady and wish her well.

I am not an expert on tax, but I welcome the Bill even though I find many of its paragraphs hard to understand. I shall not go into detail, lest my ignorance be seen. However, it is important for us to strike the right balance and achieve desirable outcomes without endangering other objectives. In tax matters, one needs to consider the policy issues that lie behind proposed changes, and whether the changes will deliver the stated objectives. As the Bill makes its way through the House, I hope that hon. Members of all parties will have a full understanding of the consequences of what is proposed. The parliamentary process can struggle with such technical matters, in which very few hon. Members are expert. We must ensure that our debates have the best possible outcomes and that we listen carefully to what is said.

I am concerned that some provisions in the Bill might harm British industry. In addition, I ask the Paymaster General to confirm that she is absolutely satisfied that the proposed anti-avoidance measures are not so broad that innocent people will fall foul of them.

As always, however, my primary concern is Northern Ireland, and I was surprised when I read clause 67 on page 56 of the Bill. It deals with the reorganisation of Northern Ireland's water and sewerage services—the hottest political potato of the moment. Over the past 30 years, we have had Conservative and Labour Governments and direct rule, but nothing has been done

in that period to ensure that people have acceptable water quality at a reasonable price. In fact, officials at the Northern Ireland Office were very quick to say that some people in Northern Ireland did not pay anything for their water, but that is not so. The fact that there is not a separate tax for water does not mean that that cost is not considered when the level of rates is decided. We have an inferior water service and putting it right will need a big input of finance. However, to ask the people of Northern Ireland to pay for putting it right and then to pay for the water would be totally unfair. It is evident from the Bill, however, that that is what the Government intend to do—and that will come as a surprise to most people in Northern Ireland. The Bill will enable the Government to get rid of their responsibility and hand to others the terrible job of repairing the water machinery and supplying water at a reasonable price.

It is hard on the people of Northern Ireland to stick that suggestion in this Bill when it has not been properly debated. The issue is a hot potato and it unites all the political parties in Northern Ireland, which all believe that we need a proper water service. It angers me that the Shaftesbury estate, which owns Lough Neagh—the largest landlocked lough in the British Isles and an immense mass of water—offered the water from the lough to the Government free of charge, but they refused the offer. Now the water suppliers for Northern Ireland will have to buy the water of Lough Neagh for many millions of pounds and the cost will be passed on to the people.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the setting up of this company will be the first step towards privatisation of our water services? This Government's policies have certainly strayed far from socialism—not only new Labour, but new clothes.

Rev. Ian Paisley: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. It disturbs me that the proposal will cause more misery in Northern Ireland. Surely it would have been possible to make the arrangements separately so that the people of Northern Ireland and their representatives in this House could have had a full debate on them. The Bill will go into Committee where the debate will concentrate on its substance, and Northern Ireland matters will be forgotten as appendices to the main debate. The Government owe the people of Northern Ireland an explanation of the haste behind this measure. The Government claim that they have not yet made up their minds, but the Bill contains the structure for handing over the water system in Northern Ireland. They failed to grasp the opportunity offered to them by the Shaftesbury estate to take over the supply of water in Northern Ireland, and I hope that the Paymaster General will be able to tell us how far they will take these proposals. Will the Government move quickly or will we be able to have a proper debate and find a way to give the people of Northern Ireland their water at a price similar to those charged in other parts of the United Kingdom?

5.54 pm

Ms Kerry McCarthy (Bristol, East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech today and it is a privilege to follow my hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark) and for Newport, East (Jessica Morden). I congratulate them on their excellent speeches.

I begin, as is customary, by paying tribute to Jean Corston, my predecessor. Jean served the people of Bristol, East for 13 years and was a dedicated and tireless constituency MP. As Chair of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights she monitored the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998, one of the most important pieces of legislation of this Government. As the first woman to chair the parliamentary Labour party—I know that Jean regarded that as an immense honour—she handled relations between the Government and Labour Back Benchers not only with the discretion required of the role, but with great integrity.

Bristol, East has a proud tradition of political activity. Ben Tillett, the dockers' leader and co-founder of the National Transport Workers Federation, was born in Easton in my constituency, and Ernest Bevin, the first general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, started his political career there. He went on, of course, to become Foreign Secretary in a Labour Government.

The constituency was previously represented by Tony Benn and Sir Stafford Cripps, both towering figures in the Labour Party in their time. The two men had much in common. They both came from wealthy, privileged backgrounds. They were both the sons of MPs—one the son of a Conservative MP who in later life had the good sense to join the Labour Party and the other the son of a Liberal MP who showed equally good sense in doing the same. Both men embarked on political journeys that at times put them severely at odds with the leadership of their party.

I cannot claim such a distinguished background, and who knows where my political journey in this House will lead me, but I do share at least two traits with both men, in that they were both vegetarians and both teetotal—the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) may be happy to hear the latter. Indeed, Churchill said of Cripps, in disgust:

"He has all of the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire."

My constituency office is above the St. George labour club, a building bought for the local party by Cripps on the strict condition that no alcohol was to be served there. I am afraid that I must report that his legacy is now more honoured in the breach than in the observance. I would, I suspect, make myself extremely unpopular with my constituents should I ever try to enforce his wishes.

Sir Stafford Cripps was of course Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1947 to 1950, and it is therefore fitting that I make this, my first speech to the House, in the Finance Bill debate. Cripps became Chancellor after Hugh Dalton was forced to resign, having leaked Budget secrets to a journalist on his way to the House. I am sure that no modern-day Chancellor would dream of doing such a thing. Cripps was said to have been responsible for Labour's dramatically reduced majority in the 1950 election, by insisting it be held in February as he thought it morally wrong to hold an election just after a Budget, in case he should be accused of bribing the voters. Times have changed.

[Ms Kerry McCarthy]

Having mentioned Hugh Dalton, I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to his biographer, Professor Ben Pimlott, who, until his sad and untimely death last year, was my PhD supervisor. He was a kind and inspirational tutor. Although I suspect that now I have been elected to this place, my thesis will go the way of other great unfinished masterpieces, I am sure that many hon. Members will continue to enjoy Ben's works of political biography for many years to come.

I am, if not unique, certainly unusual on this side of the House in having spent much of my professional life working in the City, in the world of banking and the financial markets. I worked there throughout most of the 1990s, a time when the Tories' economic credibility plunged faster than the sterling exchange rate on Black Wednesday, and a period during which Labour began to nurture the reputation for sound stewardship of our economy that it boasts to this day.

The Chancellor's nine Budgets are the bedrock—the foundation—of all that we have achieved in government. The benefits can be seen across my constituency, in the increased prosperity in the suburbs of St. George, Eastville, Brislington and Stockwood, and in the regeneration of the inner-city wards of Easton and Lawrence Hill. I pay tribute to the community activists, the voluntary sector workers and the public sector workers who have done so much to help Labour deliver its programme of social justice and economic renewal in Bristol, East.

Unfortunately time allows me to cite only one example. I was fortunate enough the other week to visit our new city academy. In the heart of the most deprived area of Bristol, what would have been dubbed a failing school has been turned round because the head teacher, Ray Priest, had the vision and the dedication to lobby for city academy status, even though it meant putting his own job on the line. The school was successful in its bid to become a specialist sports academy and with the support of its sponsors, Bristol City football club, the university of the West of England, Bristol chamber of commerce and, in particular, its chair of governors, John Laycock, it has become the biggest employer in my constituency, employing 600 people.

The school reflects the diversity of that part of Bristol; more than 60 per cent. of the pupils come from a visible ethnic minority community and 31 languages are spoken there. Some of the pupils came to the UK as asylum seekers and in some cases their right to remain still hangs in the balance, but I have no doubt that each child is capable of making a real contribution to this country if only they are given the opportunity and life chances to do so.

I was privileged to spend some time talking to a handful of sixth-form students who are benefiting from the Government's £30 a week education maintenance allowance. With continued Government support and with teachers who are dedicated to the task of lifting the aspirations and nurturing the ambitions of children from humble backgrounds, I am sure that the academy will go on to produce a generation of winners, both on the playing field and off.

It is important that the school does not simply benefit the pupils who are lucky enough to be enrolled there. The capital investment has brought a deprived inner-city area truly first-class sports facilities, a theatre, a professionally equipped kitchen for catering students and computer suites that would certainly be the envy of the new Members who have spent the past few weeks fighting over the one PC in our room on the Upper Committee Corridor. The school wants to open its door to the community and indeed is obliged by its funding agreement to do so, and I shall be speaking to Ministers about what I can do to assist it in achieving that objective.

I am proud to become an MP at a time when the issues of trade justice, debt cancellation and overseas aid have come to the political forefront as never before. The people of Bristol have shown overwhelming support for the Make Poverty History campaign, and on Saturday I shall be joining them as they form a giant human white band around College Green in the city centre.

It is particularly poignant that the city of Bristol has taken that cause to its heart. Bristol's wealth was built on the 18th-century slave trade. More than 2,100 ships set sail from Bristol on slaving voyages, carrying about 500,000 Africans to slavery in the Americas. Bristol's wealth was built on trade in Africans and in slave-produced commodities such as sugar, chocolate, coffee, cotton and tobacco. Too few people questioned the moral legitimacy of that trade at the time. It was reported that, when William Wilberforce's Bill to abolish the slave trade was defeated in the House in 1791, the bells of St. Mary Redcliffe church in my constituency were rung amid general civic celebrations.

The city has put its past behind it. Today, Bristol is home to many Africans and African Caribbeans, who along with Asians and other ethnic minorities play an important role in the civic and cultural life of the city.

Bristol also has a growing reputation as a centre for environmentally and ethically sound trading, and I am proud to say that in March it achieved fair trade city status. It would be fitting if we could celebrate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 by genuinely embracing the fair trade ethos, not just in Bristol and not just across Britain but by using our presidencies of the G8 and the European Union to instil such values on an international scale. From the slave trade to fair trade—that would be a legacy of which we could be truly proud.

6.3 pm

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): I am most grateful for this opportunity to address the House for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Members for Newport, East (Jessica Morden), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark) and for Bristol, East (Ms McCarthy) on their excellent contributions to the debate in their maiden speeches.

I would like to begin by paying a personal tribute to my predecessor, Alan Hurst. He served our constituency well for eight years, was an individual of the utmost integrity and was highly regarded in all our communities. Alan was particularly active in supporting a number of local campaigns, he served our farmers well on the Select Committee on Agriculture and he stood up for the need for pensioners to have dignity and security in their retirement. Above all, Alan was a gentleman and I wish him all the best for the future.

As I will be the last Member of Parliament to represent the Braintree constituency as it currently exists, I would be remiss if I did not also pay tribute to Alan's predecessor, Tony Newton, the first Member of Parliament for Braintree. Tony represented the constituency for 23 years and rose to become Leader of the House. The respect Tony earned here was mirrored in my constituency. Indeed, I can hardly go to a household or meet a constituent that Tony did not at some time or another help out. On a personal level, I thank Tony for his guidance and support over the past six years. Braintree has been well represented and well served by my two predecessors and I hope to live up to the standard of serving our community that they have set.

I understand that it is traditional in maiden speeches not to make controversial remarks, but I see nothing controversial in saying without hesitation that I am honoured and privileged to represent not only one of the most beautiful areas in Essex but also one of the loveliest parts of our country. The constituency is a mix of old and new, with some exquisite examples of mediaeval architecture and some attractive modern developments.

The constituency is dominated by two market towns, Braintree and Witham, which in turn are surrounded by more than 40 villages and hamlets. While Witham traces its origins to the Saxons, one can see in the town both post-war and modern developments, almost side by side with 16th and 17th-century dwellings. Further up the road is the village of Silver End, a model village built in the early 20th century by the Critall family, who did so much to bring employment to the area at that time, and whose name is synonymous with the creation of metal window frames.

We also have some extraordinarily beautiful mediaeval villages, such as Bocking, Coggeshall, the Colnes, Feering, Finchingfield, Gosfield, Great Bardfield, Kelvedon and Wethersfield, many of which have won the Essex county village of the year award. Perhaps the most notable mediaeval structures are the Cressing Temple barns, built in the early 13th century, which are the largest and most complete set of mediaeval barns in Britain.

Braintree itself began to develop back in 1199 when it was granted a charter to hold a market by King John, which is still held to this day. The town was a pioneer in seeing the benefits of immigration when, in the 16th century, Flemish Protestant immigrants brought their weaving skills to the area and the woollen industry prospered. In the 1830s, two centuries later, a descendant of those Huguenot refugees, Samuel Courtauld, opened his silk factory.

Today, Braintree is one of the fastest growing towns in Britain and has a number of extremely attractive developments, most notably Notley Garden Village. However, perhaps Braintree's most famous export in recent years has been one of the country's most innovative modern rock bands, The Prodigy.

As I moved to Braintree from America when I was nine years old, I was curious about any American connections with the area. Although first impressions might lead a visitor to believe that those are limited to the McDonald's, the Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the Pizza Hut on what is referred to locally as cholesterol corner on the Galleys corner roundabout, I was interested to learn that the last American to become a Member of Parliament, Chips Channon, who was elected in 1935, 70 years ago, as the Member of Parliament for Southend, lived locally in Kelvedon hall. Furthermore, the first US airfield in the UK during the second world war was Andrews Field station in Braintree, near the village of Great Saling. I mention the latter point as my father, who was an officer in the US armed forces at that time, and subsequently in the US State Department, spent a considerable amount of time in Britain and was a strong Anglophile. So it was not surprising to my mother's friends that, following his death when I was six, my mother married an Englishman and moved our family to Britain.

I have always believed that politics is about people and how we make their lives better, yet many of my constituents feel that the Government—however well meaning—interfere in their lives when they should not and do not really support them when they should. I draw the attention of the House to the concerns of three very different sections of our community.

The first section is made up of our hard-working public servants. The tendency of the Government to centralise the management of our public services and to set more and more targets for our public servants robs our front-line professionals of the freedom they need to get on with their work. For example, many teachers in my constituency feel that they are denied real autonomy over school discipline, while our doctors have been subjected to a growing number of targets that often subvert their clinical judgment while denying them the flexibility to respond to specific patient needs.

The second section is made up of those who live in our rural communities. Two thirds of my constituency is rural and many of my constituents feel not only that their way of life is under threat, but that the very fabric of their day-to-day lives is being diminished. Rural post offices and village shops are being closed down. Local bus services are being cut daily and there is almost a complete lack of police visibility, as our forces become more and more overstretched. In addition, the farmers in my constituency are increasingly burdened with more red tape and regulation.

Perhaps most important of all is my concern for the pensioners in my constituency—a concern that was shared by my predecessor. We have many local voluntary groups that support our pensioners, such as Age Concern and the Braintree Pensioners Action Group. I cannot praise them enough for the work that they do on behalf of the elderly.

A key concern of many pensioners is that the headline increase in pensions does not take into account what they actually have left to live on. While pensions may have increased in real terms by 21 per cent. in the past eight years, the reality is that higher fuel bills combined with a significant increase in the council tax—more than 70 per cent. in my constituency—have had a severe impact on pensioners' weekly cash budgets. Many pensioners in my constituency are fortunate enough to own their own homes and the Government therefore view them as asset-rich. However, in reality, those pensioners will become increasingly cash-poor, especially when they find their houses placed in a higher band, following the Government's decision to reband many properties.

[Mr. Brooks Newmark]

If, as I believe, we should judge a society on how it looks after the most vulnerable, especially the elderly, surely the Government must address that issue by re-establishing the link between earnings and pensions, as well as by offering a significant rebate to pensioners from their council tax bills. Yet in finding a solution to the challenges that our society faces today, I draw hon. Members' attention to the words of Abraham Lincoln, who in his speech on government by the people said:

"you cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong . . . you cannot lift the wage payer by putting down the wage payer . . . you cannot further the brotherhood of man by inciting class hatred . . . you cannot help men by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves."

While the Government seem to believe that a few billion pounds more here and a little more Government interference there will resolve the nation's ills, we have seen little evidence that such an approach works. I believe that, if we want to create a better society, we need to constrain the ever-increasing power of government and to free ordinary people to make their own decisions.

I believe that ordinary people know much better than politicians what is best for themselves, their families and their community. I believe that teachers know what is best for their pupils, and I believe that doctors and nurses know what is best for their patients—not remote politicians and bureaucrats in Whitehall. Indeed, last week's rejection of the European constitution by the French and the Dutch was as much a rebuke to their own remote and increasingly out-of-touch politicians, as it was a rejection of the constitution itself.

Although, as a student, I was heavily influenced by the writings of Friedman, Hayek and Keith Joseph, it was my first year economics professor at Harvard, J. K. Galbraith, who taught me that

"politics is not the art of the possible . . . it often consists of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable"—

which brings me to the Bill.

During the passage of the last Finance Act, my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), the shadow Chancellor—the then shadow Chief Secretary—noted the importance of the tax avoidance measures proposed by the Government. However, the devil is in the detail, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), the new shadow Chief Secretary stated, we must be careful that we do not damage the competitiveness of the UK tax regime. We must also be careful that we do not drive offshore many of the huge multinationals which the Bill could affect. That risks costing UK plc jobs. It also risks costing the Treasury other tax benefits, such as the taxation that it collects from those employed by such companies.

As the shadow Chief Secretary recommended, we must use the opportunity in Committee to ensure that we have the necessary balance between casting the net of anti-avoidance legislation wide enough to prevent circumvention and maintaining a tax regime that does not prevent foreign investment in the UK. While I appreciate that the Government have attempted to ameliorate some of industry's concerns, the Bill still risks making Britain a less attractive location for multinationals and as it completes its parliamentary passage, let us not choose the disastrous over the unpalatable.

I should like to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech today. I should also like to thank the people of Braintree for the honour of electing me as their Member of Parliament. I will be a strong voice in the House for all my constituents.

6.15 pm

Stephen Hesford (Wirral, West) (Lab): I welcome the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) to his place and congratulate him on his maiden speech—*[Interruption]*—if he has the courtesy to listen to the House following a maiden speech. However, I offer him a note of caution: the House often gives the benefit of the doubt about humility when an hon. Member makes a maiden speech. He mentioned the tradition of making a non-controversial speech—a tradition that was well trodden and well spoken about in three other maiden speeches, on which I congratulate the hon. Members concerned—but he tried our patience in that regard.

I should also point out to the hon. Gentleman that, if he does pay heed to what the people say, he must want to reflect on the outcome of the general election, because much of the version of economics that he espoused was roundly rejected there. Although I welcome him to his place and congratulate him on his speech—I look forward to doing battle with him and his colleagues in coming years—I wish to offer him that note of caution.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Hesford: No, not at this point.

In some sense, I follow the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) in saying that I speak with caution in this debate. This is certainly the first Finance Bill debate in which I have spoken in eight years, and I am no expert. Like him, I think that the detail is, of course, complex, but one cannot avoid these matters for ever. I understand that this is a rather small Finance Bill—it has only 72 clauses and 11 schedules—so I felt able to dip my toe into this economic debate.

On the Bill's background, it is sometimes said in Finance Bill debates that only two things are certain in life: one is death, the other is taxes. In terms of death, I want to place on record that the report of my electoral demise was premature. In terms of taxes, that is what the Bill is about. In terms of certainty about taxes, I look to the Liberal Benches and pose a question. We know that the 1p on income tax went by the board in previous elections. It is now reported that the 50 per cent. tax rate on income over £100,000 is about to go by the board. I wonder what the Liberal Democrat taxation policy will be at the next election—certainly, as things stand, it will be uncertain.

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not fully understand the manner in which to address the House, like many other recent hon. Members who have made maiden speeches. Does he think it extraordinary for a party both to keep to its principles and to consider changing circumstances, thus adapting and rethinking its policies as it responds to them? It seems that he has

asked my party why we do not review the current situation, yet constantly puts to us issues that are in the past.

Stephen Hesford: That would be a fair point, if there was a principle at stake. I understand that the debate in the Liberal party is whether it appears too left wing to the public to take constituencies from the Conservative party, which is why it wants to review its taxation policy. If the hon. Lady wants to persuade me that that is a point of principle rather than low politics, she can perhaps do so if she addresses the House later.

I endorse the words with which my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General opened the debate when she gave us a brief run-down of the economic climate, which is the background to the Bill. However, I want to widen those words. The Treasury under Labour has been an engine for beneficial social change and I have chosen to dip my toe in the water of Finance Bills at long last—after eight years—because this Bill follows on from that principle.

The Treasury, under my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and his Front-Bench colleagues, has not approached its business with the traditional dead-hand approach followed by the Conservative Government. The Treasury has been responsible for sustainable growth under Labour, which is set to continue. It has produced a climate in which we can afford public investment and enabled the party to set the trend for revitalising and modernising our public services. As several maiden speeches made by Labour Members have pointed out, the Treasury has helped to eradicate child poverty and underpin hard-working families. The Bill continues that trend. I do not wish to talk about the Bill in detail because this is a Second Reading debate, but I shall pick out a few aspects that support those propositions and are socially useful or business-friendly.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) used the time-honoured debating tactic of threatening the House with complexity. He said any number of times that the matters in the Bill were complex—no doubt they are. The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), who might wind up for the Opposition later, is looking at me quizzically—

Mr. Spring: That is one way of describing it.

Stephen Hesford: The point that I am making is that there is a simple principle behind the so-called complexity. I asked the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge whether there would be a Division on Second Reading because although the simple principle behind the Bill is fairness, Conservative Members try to criticise it by saying that the provisions on tax avoidance are being over-strengthened. That demonstrates the difference between Labour and Conservative Members and the hon. Member for West Suffolk will no doubt explore the matter in Committee.

The Bill contains four elements relating to social justice. It has an environmental aspect and what I call a corporate social responsibility aspect—the anti-tax avoidance measures. It contains measures on pension assistance, it will encourage research and development and it will cut red tape.

I welcome clause 2, which will reform the fuel scale charges in line with the Government's wider environmental objectives. It will give tax incentives to less polluting cars because the VAT fuel scale charges system will be based on carbon dioxide emissions. I also welcome clause 6, which is in line with the VAT compliance strategy outlined by my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General. Clause 6 and schedule 1 are also in line with the principle of fair taxation because they deal with the disclosure of VAT avoidance schemes. Of course, the provisions are limited to firms with a turnover of more than £600,000, so it cannot be said that they are aimed at small business. As I suggested earlier, the measure represents a form of corporate social responsibility. I ask my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary his estimate of the amount that Treasury will gain from the measure during a full tax year.

Clause 7, which is titled, "Charge to income tax on lump sum", is what I would call a pension-assisting scheme. It will give pensioners added flexibility when retiring because, if they take a lump sum, they may be assessed according to their final salary or a year later according to their retirement pension. *[Interruption.]* I welcome the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) back to the Chamber and hope that he is feeling himself again.

Clause 13 relates to corporation tax exemption for organisations. It will benefit scientific research organisations and enable them to take wide-ranging research and development opportunities in addition to those development opportunities that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has tried to entrench in the economy. It will remove red tape to boost R and D.

I welcome clause 47, which is small but will create opportunities to cut red tape. It will introduce the power to make regulations to facilitate the stamp duty land tax process through e-conveyancing initiatives. I am not an expert in the field, so I would like to know for my own benefit the categories of individuals or companies who will benefit most from the measure.

I have dipped my toe into the water of the Finance Bill and welcome what has been described as the second Finance Bill. It continues our aim of social justice and introduces an element of corporate social responsibility. I do not know whether I will have the opportunity to serve on the Standing Committee—I have not served on a Finance Bill Committee before—but if I do, I look forward to debating the Bill in more detail.

6.29 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) on a fine maiden speech. I do not agree with what the hon. Member for Wirral, West (Stephen Hesford) said. I thought that my hon. Friend set out with admirable clarity his motivation as a politician, which, in my view, is exactly what should be contained in a maiden speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his expression of his motivation and vision, as well as his description of his constituency, as I congratulate the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark), for Newport, East (Jessica Morden) and for Bristol, East (Ms McCarthy) on expressing to the House their alternative political vision that motivated them and brought them here as well. We have

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

heard four good maiden speeches and I confidently expect that we will hear one or two more before the debate has concluded.

It has been said that this is the second half of a Finance Bill of which we have already debated the first half. As others have made it clear that they do not claim any great expertise in the detail of the Bill, I will not put myself ahead of that and claim an expertise that others, wisely, have disavowed. It is not appropriate in a Second Reading debate to try to go through all the detail of the various tax avoidance points that are more properly debated in Committee.

I want to draw out two principles that are important for consideration at Second Reading and which should inform the development of tax policy in this and future Bills. The first principle is one to which I referred in a brief intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). I hold absolutely no brief for those who market tax avoidance schemes and, like my hon. Friend, I make it crystal clear that I support well-thought-through, clear and well-defined anti-tax avoidance measures. There is no dispute between the two Front Benches—and, indeed, between Conservative Back Benchers and the Treasury Bench—on the need to ensure that the Revenue is protected. When people bring forward artificial avoidance measures, Ministers should be supported when they take steps to protect the Revenue. As a former Financial Secretary to the Treasury, I can say that there is a kind of camaraderie between us and it is important that we have some group therapy to ensure that this important principle is defended. I make no apology for that.

When we introduce anti-tax avoidance measures, we should observe some important principles. The first is that if we propose measures that are based on additional discretion for the tax authorities—the measures in this Bill concerned with combating tax arbitrage are a clear case in point, where there is an enhancement of the discretion granted to the tax authorities under clauses 24 and 26—we should do so only in clearly defined circumstances, mindful always of the need to protect the principle of taxpayer certainty. That is why I made the, I think, correct linkage that if we are to enhance discretion for the tax authorities, hand in hand with that should go a greater acceptance than has been our tradition in this country of binding tax clearances granted by the Revenue to the taxpayer when the taxpayer seeks the opinion of the Revenue before making certain dispositions in their affairs.

I am well aware of the resistance within the Revenue to that principle. Revenue and Customs, as we must now call it, says, quite rightly, that it is not in the business of giving advice to taxpayers and that if a taxpayer wants advice, he should go to his accountants. Free advice from the Revenue is not part of its businesses. That is perfectly true, but if a specific proposal is taken to the Revenue in an area of tax policy where the authority has an acknowledged discretion, it is entirely right that the taxpayer should be able to get a ruling in advance of implementing that proposal on how the Revenue will exercise its discretion. I regard that as part of the deregulation agenda.

It is worth considering the alternatives. One is that the taxpayer constantly has to weigh a range of different possible outcomes and the only winners will be the tax advisers who go to the nth degree to tease out all the possible options. That cost and waste of time and effort within a business could be eliminated simply by the Revenue telling the taxpayer in advance how the law will be enforced in a given set of circumstances that the taxpayer is planning to create.

I do not disagree with the principle contained in these clauses on combating tax arbitrage, and I absolutely do not want us to make tax arbitrage easier. However, if we are to introduce greater discretion as a way of combating tax arbitrage, it is reasonable to ask that there be greater certainty available to the taxpayer through the principle of greater availability of binding clearances given by the Revenue.

Rob Marris: I think that I understand the thrust of what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but he wants to have it all ways. He wants certainty; he wants discretion; he wants the state to be providing free tax advice; he does not want the state to be providing free tax advice. I appreciate that these are difficult issues, but he seems to be proposing the reverse of what he said earlier, which is that the state should be providing free tax advice. I draw a parallel with the planning system. When someone puts in a planning application and it is refused, he puts in another one and another one and keeps tweaking it until he gets approval. Someone proposing to get around tax rules for a tax gain might seek clearance, but get knocked back. He might then put in another request and then another. He is looking for free tax advice, which we just cannot give.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman has shot his own argument out of the water. There is a sense in which one can draw a parallel with the planning system—planners are given advance clearance on how the authorities will use their power in the absence of planning consent to tell someone to take down a development that he might otherwise have contemplated putting up.

The position in tax law as it operates is that, too often, taxpayers have to make their arrangements blind and ignorant of how tax law will be applied in the given set of circumstances that they are creating. People putting up a building have certainty when they do so that they have finally got planning consent before it goes up. That is exactly the sort of certainty, in advance of people organising their affairs, that should be available to taxpayers, but too often is not because of the Revenue's resistance to the principle of advance and binding clearances.

That is the first point. The second point is more mechanical. I am delighted, for two reasons, to see my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) back in his place. The first, and most important, is that I am delighted to see that he is smiling and clearly feeling better than he was earlier. The second is that I want to refer to some of the things he said about the way in which the Red Book has evolved over the years. If I may say so to my hon. Friend, I always think that we make a stronger case in politics when instead of saying that standards have slipped and that we want to go back to a previous golden age, we chart a way forward to the re-establishment of principles that I agree

are very important. Those principles are the certainty and high quality of the information that should be available to the House in making decisions about the public revenues.

The Red Book published in March contains two tables on the revenue effect of measures that the Chancellor plans to take. Two lots of measures are listed as protecting the tax revenues. Those on page 186 total just over £1 billion of full-year revenue effect. Those on page 188, which were announced prior to the Budget, constitute a revenue effect of about £1.2 billion. In planning the public finances, the Chancellor assumed that those various measures to combat tax avoidance would protect the public revenues to the tune of about £2.25 billion, but the House has no external way of checking the numbers that the Government produce.

There is a suspicion abroad that every time there is a hole in the public finances, the Chancellor goes around the Treasury looking for a series of anti-avoidance measures that will allow the figures to look better than they otherwise would—to the tune of £2.25 billion this year—and that we never close the loop. We never know whether the anti-avoidance measures raise any money or, if they do, whether it comes close to the sums that are claimed for them. Although more recently the out-turns have come closer to the forecasts than they have done previously, there is a suspicion that one reason why there were significant gaps between forecast and out-turns is that the claims made for the anti-avoidance measures were never lived up to in practice. That is relevant to the problem as it relates to anti-avoidance, but it is also part of a much bigger problem.

One of the proposals by the Conservative party in the last Parliament was the need to strengthen the information that is available to Parliament, independent of the Government, on the likely course of events in the public finances—something akin to the Congressional Budget Office that serves the American Congress, giving it advice, independent of the Government, of the likely effect of both revenues and expenditure, and therefore of the likely scale of public borrowing. My right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench described that as an independent fiscal projection committee. I hope that they follow that through.

There are two parallels in our system. The first is the National Audit Office, where a structure exists to provide advice to the House through the Comptroller and Auditor General and the institution of the Public Accounts Committee. We could establish a similar organisation to provide to the House an independent view of the likely course of the public finances.

The second parallel is the claim that is often—in my view, rightly—made by the Government that they improved the quality of macro-economic decision making by making the Bank of England independently responsible for monetary policy. I am not in favour of taking the fundamental Budget judgments away from the Chancellor. What I am in favour of is giving to this House, which is supposed ultimately to control the purse strings and to be the source of parliamentary power, an improved quality of information on the likely course of public revenues, the likely level of Government expenditure and the likely impact of individual Budget measures.

The proposal surfaced in the last Parliament, but in truth it has been talked about for much longer. If we are looking for ways—as we should be—of strengthening the accountability to Parliament of Ministers, it would be a huge step forward if Parliament had its own source of information about what the Government publish in the Red Book. That is why I linked the proposal to what my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford said. One way of achieving that is, as he suggested, to go back to an independently produced Red Book, if such a golden age ever existed. Another way—in my view, preferable—is to give Parliament a stronger source of independent advice with which to challenge Ministers and to hold them to account.

6.45 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) on an excellent maiden speech. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] The hon. Members for Newport, East (Jessica Morden), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark) and for Bristol, East (Ms McCarthy) also made excellent contributions. They are a hard act to follow. I am also delighted to take part in the same debate as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), who is a great parliamentarian of our time. It is a great honour to speak in the same debate.

I intended to make my maiden speech when we discussed the Queen's Speech, but was thwarted for the best of reasons by my wife having a baby at a most inopportune moment. I hope that the House will be as patient with me as it always is with people who speak in the Chamber for the first time. I intend—much to everyone's delight, no doubt—to start off as I mean to go on by being brief.

There is no greater privilege than to represent one's constituency in Parliament. Shipley is a fine constituency within the Bradford district in West Yorkshire. Indeed, it is one of the few Conservative constituencies in a metropolitan area. Although Shipley is the largest place within the constituency, it is a rich and diverse area, with Bingley—home of the Bradford and Bingley building society—being the second-largest place. It also includes lovely villages such as Harden, Eldwick, Cullingworth, Wilsden, Denholme, Micklethwaite, Burley-in-Wharfedale, Menston and Baildon, where I have the pleasure to live.

The most famous part of the constituency is Saltaire, home of Salts mill, developed by the philanthropist Sir Titus Salt. It is a world heritage site and I recommend it as a great place to visit. Shipley, like the rest of Bradford, also has great curries. The Prime Minister and other members of the Cabinet like the Shipley constituency, too. I know this because of the number of times they visited it before the election. I hope they continue to do so.

The greatest strength in the constituency is the people who live there. They are generous, resourceful and compassionate in equal measure, but above all they have great common sense and speak their mind. They also respect people who speak their mind even if they disagree with them. I assure hon. Members that I am a straight-talking Yorkshireman who will not be afraid to be controversial—although, as tradition dictates, not on this occasion.

[Philip Davies]

Shipley has been very lucky to have been represented in Parliament by men of great distinction, particularly over the past 50 years: Geoffrey Hurst was independently minded and served his constituents so well that people still refer to him today; Sir Marcus Fox represented Shipley for 27 years and was a hugely respected figure both inside and outside Westminster; and, for the past eight years, it was represented by Christopher Leslie.

At 24, Chris Leslie was the youngest MP to be elected in the Labour landslide of 1997, but he quickly made a reputation as one of the most able of that intake. As someone who had been born and brought up in the area, Chris clearly cares about the Shipley constituency. His talents in Westminster, acknowledged by Members on both sides of the House, marked him out as an effective Minister. Add to that the fact that he is a very nice guy and popular, it made him a formidable opponent. It was a great achievement of his to win the seat in 1997 and then to retain it in 2001. He came within a whisker of holding on to it again at the recent election. He should be proud of his record. He accepted defeat with the good grace that I knew I could expect of him. I suspect and hope that we have not heard the last of Chris Leslie in the political arena—although hopefully not in Shipley.

One thing was clear at the recent election: politics and politicians have never been held in such low regard by the public. We should all be greatly concerned by that. I feel that, all too often, politicians set out to be popular, with the inevitable consequence that they become anything but popular. I believe that politicians should set out to be respected rather than popular, and that respect can last for ever. We all have a responsibility to reverse the decline in the public's perception of us. If all I achieve in my time in Parliament is to have done my bit to change that perception, I shall feel that I have done something worth while.

My right hon. and hon. Friends, especially the most ambitious of the new intake, will be greatly pleased to learn that I have no desire to rise through the ranks as a shadow Minister and, after the next election, as a Minister of the Crown—that is, all my right hon. and hon. Friends will be delighted apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), who has the great misfortune to be my Whip. I wish to remain on the Back Benches and to speak up for the things that matter to me and my constituents. I want people to know that when I say something, I say it because I mean it, not because someone has told me to say it. I believe that that is the best way I can help to restore people's faith in politics.

Before entering Parliament, I worked for the supermarket chain Asda in customer service and marketing. It provided the best possible grounding for a politician because I met so many people from so many backgrounds. Whoever said "the customer is always right" never worked for Asda. I encountered the customer who accused us of being racist towards Irish people, because we sold "thick Irish sausages". Trying to persuade her that "thick" related to the sausages and not to the Irish was beyond me. Hon. Members should therefore understand why I will campaign hard against the blight of political correctness, which is doing so much damage to our country. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Although Asda is part of a huge multinational company, Walmart, I also have experience working some years ago for my mother in her small business—a betting shop in Doncaster. I gently suggest that the lack of business experience on the Government Benches should lead Ministers to listen carefully to those who have first-hand experience of creating wealth and employment in this country.

There are many issues that have to be dealt with in Shipley, including crime, the horrendous traffic problems at Saltaire and the finance of the local national health service trust. I will be a persistent advocate of action to improve the Shipley constituency. I also want a better country—a country in which hard work, thrift and doing the right thing are rewarded, unlike now; a country where the Government do less and encourage individual freedom and responsibility; and a country that has a sovereign Parliament, not one run by a corrupt and inefficient institution called the European Union, which we subsidise to the tune of billions of pounds a year.

During the general election campaign, I encountered not one business or constituent who thought that tax evasion and avoidance were a substantial problem—although many complained that taxes are too high. Businesses need less regulation, not more. I suspect that the real reason for the measures in the Bill is to raise extra money for an increasingly financially embarrassed Government, rather than to make the tax system fair. The best way to prevent tax avoidance and evasion is to have fewer taxes to avoid and evade.

As I said at the start of my speech, there is no greater privilege than to represent and serve one's constituents in Parliament. I am truly honoured that the people of Shipley have put their trust in me to follow in the footsteps of my illustrious predecessors. I shall work hard to ensure that I do not let them down.

6.54 pm

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I enjoyed all the previous maiden speeches, especially the one by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), which was amusing as well as thoughtful. I shall have great difficulty following him.

It is a great honour to me to stand here as the new Member of Parliament for Wellingborough. It has been a very long political journey. In 1992, I stood in my first parliamentary election for the constituency of Islwyn. There I met Sheila Organ, who became my agent and a good friend and who has encouraged me throughout what has been, at times, a difficult journey. During the campaign, we knocked on doors in Islwyn day and night; we must have called on hundreds, if not thousands of homes. Things looked good—we were well received—and come polling day, they still looked good. Only when I went to the count did I get an inkling that things were going slightly wrong. Before me were 40 or so trestle tables, but the returning officer took me to one side and said, "Mr. Bone, that table is for you. All the rest are for Mr. Kinnock." When the result was declared, it was a close-run thing. I lost to Mr. Kinnock by a mere 25,000 votes.

In 1997, I was selected as the candidate for Pudsey in west Yorkshire, where the retiring Member for the seat was the excellent Sir Giles Shaw. Despite the hard work of my team, we were swept away by the Labour landslide. On to Wellingborough, which in 2001 was the most marginal Labour seat in the country, with a majority of 187 votes. My campaign team, ably led by Lady Helen Fry, worked hard to achieve a Conservative victory and I thought that I must win this time. Not only did I lose, however, but I turned Wellingborough into a relatively safe Labour seat.

After 2001, I was beginning to wonder whether someone was trying to tell me something—

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Ivan Lewis): Are you thinking what we're thinking?

Mr. Bone: That saying's time had not yet come, but there is another—"If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again." The campaign to win Wellingborough at the last election started in August 2004, when my exceptionally talented campaign manager, Leigh Hooker, joined me. Had it not been for her skill and outstanding leadership, the result might have been different. Under her leadership, my able team, consisting of Paul Bell, Andy Mercer, Steven North, Barbara Jenney, Calum Heckstall-Smith, Peter Bedford, Malcolm Walters, Roger Powell, Richard Lewis and others I might have forgotten, set about on a campaign the like of which had never before been seen in Wellingborough. At the count, I was ready with my speech to congratulate another Labour candidate on his re-election and, sure enough, the pile of Labour votes was rising higher and higher, but to my great relief my pile of votes edged just ahead. What an honour and privilege it was to be announced as the new Member of Parliament for Wellingborough.

I pay tribute to my predecessors. Sir Peter Fry was MP for Wellingborough from 1969 to 1997. A great parliamentarian, he was known for much more than that. He was known as an MP who really cared for his constituency and worked hard for it. Many people in Wellingborough voted for Sir Peter not because he was a Conservative, but because of his outstanding service to the constituency. His successor, my predecessor, Paul Stinchcombe, was also a great local Member of Parliament. He worked hard for his constituents and was well liked and although I disagreed with him on almost every political matter, on some non-political matters he and I could agree. One of those matters was Alexine's law.

Mr. Stinchcombe strove to highlight the difference between the penalties for causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving. The campaign for Alexine's law highlights the story of 17-year-old Alexine Melnik who tragically, a year ago to this day, was killed by a careless driver. That driver received a punishment of a few points on his licence and a small fine. I will continue to campaign for what Mr. Stinchcombe was trying to achieve on that issue.

My constituency is at the heart of Northamptonshire and consists of the two towns of Rushden and Wellingborough and their surrounding villages. It is a very diverse community in which the rural and the urban live side by side. It is a wonderful place to live and to bring up a family, and I was delighted when my daughter, Helen, won the Hawkes scholarship and was able to go to Wellingborough school.

There is work to be done in the constituency, however. We have the six worst roads in the country. Our hospital is 159th worst out of 192 for cancelled operations. We have virtually no NHS dentists in Wellingborough and Rushden. A secondary school has been knocked down, resulting in some children being left at home and receiving no education at all. Twenty per cent. of the population are scared to go out at night because of their fear of crime, and we have one of the worst ratios of police officers to population in the country. However, when the previous county council proposed to cut the fire service in Rushden, that was a cut too far.

Rushden fire station is the only whole-time, professionally manned fire station in the whole of east Northamptonshire. Rushden is a hugely expanding town, and to cut that fire cover to save a few hundred thousand pounds would be ludicrous—even more so when the county council has a spin department that costs more than £500,000 a year. If I asked my constituents whether they would want a cut in the number of firefighters or the number of spin doctors, I think I know what their answer would be. All is not doom and gloom, however. We now have a new county council, ably led by Councillor Jim Harker, and he has promised to review the situation.

As a Member of Parliament, I believe that we should put country first, constituency second, and party third and last. I can see the anguish on the Whip's face as I say that, but I would like to explain briefly what I mean. On 31 March this year, I attended RAF Cranwell with my wife, Jenny, without whose support and kindness over the years I would never have got here. Perhaps it was her saying, "If you don't win this time, I'm going to divorce you" that provided the extra incentive that I needed. We were at Cranwell to see the graduation of 212 initial officer training, and escorting the colours that day was our eldest son, Alexander. As I watched those young people who were about to embark on a career that would clearly require them to put country first, and who might have to make the ultimate sacrifice, it was brought home to me that every politician must always put country first. I am delighted that Flying Officer Alexander John William Bone is sitting up in the Gallery to hear my maiden speech.

After my defeat in 2001, I had to ask myself what was wrong, and it seemed to me that so many politicians were arrogant and out of touch. They were all too willing to preach, but they were not particularly interested in listening. I was determined that that would not happen to me. So for the past four years, I have listened to local people and then campaigned on their behalf. However, I am afraid that there is still a great deal of arrogance among us. I am of course talking about the European elite. They always think that they know best, but I should like to suggest that they take a leaf out of my book, adopt a listening campaign like mine, and listen to the people of Europe. The people of France and the Netherlands have spoken, and they have put country first. We have heard the Government's financial plans in our debate today. The European Union takes £10 billion or £12 billion each year from this country. Now, there is a suggestion that our rebate,

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which was so successfully negotiated by Margaret Thatcher, might be withdrawn. Even my four-year-old son, Thomas, could tell us that that is daft. He might say, "Daddy, why do you want to pay and get nothing in return?"

I hope that my speech has not been too controversial, and I should like to leave the House with this parting thought. I hope that our Government are not becoming too arrogant and out of touch, and I hope that they will listen and always put our country first.

7.6 pm

Mr. Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech in the House today. As my hon. Friends who have already made their maiden speeches have said, it is a great honour to be elected to this place. It is also a great honour to follow excellent speeches such as the eloquent one made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone). Humility in the House and in politics generally can often be false, but the long road that he has taken to the House has taught him—a lesson that I hope all of us have learnt—to listen to the people and to respect them.

We have heard an excellent speech from my fellow Yorkshire Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and I congratulate him on making an amusing and passionate speech. He is committed to what Yorkshire people and everyone else in the country are now looking for in their politicians: honesty. They want people who will tell it like it is. I hope that I am not being controversial when I say that something has happened in recent years to make people feel that that standard has dropped.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) made an excellent speech that went to the core of why he is in politics. I shall have to ad lib later, because it dealt with many of the themes that I had intended to address in my maiden speech. It was interesting that he, like me, has particularly identified older people as suffering under a system that puts means-testing ahead of dignity. Perhaps this is not a controversial issue, because there seems to be a growing consensus on the matter. Nearly everyone—with the possible exception of one person who often sits on the Government Front Bench beside the Prime Minister—now believes that older people need dignity, not means-testing. National associations have joined with all political parties bar one in believing that.

I should like to pay tribute to my predecessor, James Cran. He was described by *The Guardian* as a "flinty Aberdonian", but beneath the flint lay someone who was actually very considerate and kind. He was interested in improving things in general and individual people's problems in particular. Jim's lasting legacy is to be found in Withernsea. As a newly appointed Conservative candidate, I met several Labour councillors, and the first thing that they said was that the then sitting Member had helped to transform that town. If, after whatever career I have in this place, there are Labour councillors in the towns and villages around Beverley and Holderness who pay tribute to the work that I have done to help their communities, we can all accept that a true contribution will have been made.

My constituency has four towns: Beverley, Hedon and, on the coast, Hornsea and Withernsea. Beverley is famed for its beauty, its minster and its people. Many Members give quite a lot of history in their maiden speeches, but I do not plan to do that. One thing that I would offer is an invitation to an historic figure, the present Prime Minister, to join me on a visit to Beverley minster. There is a precedent for that. Henry V went to Beverley minster after Agincourt to give thanks. I suggest that the Prime Minister joins me in going to Beverley minster to give thanks for the French "non" in the referendum the other day. I am sure that, for different reasons, he joins me in a joyous reception of that historic decision.

The Beverley and Holderness constituency, which as I said has four towns, has existed only since 1997. In political terms, the area has an interesting reputation. We hear of rotten boroughs, and the truth is that in Beverley and Hedon we had two of the most rotten in the country. From—I think—1292, Hedon was able to appoint two Members of Parliament, and those appointed were a distinguished lot. One was Prime Minister for a day. Many of us in this House, even the strongest Back Bencher, might like to be Prime Minister for a day.

In Hornsea we have a tourist town. I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) inviting people to Weston. Hornsea and Withernsea offer equal attraction to anything that the south coast might offer, and I suggest that any Member visit east Yorkshire. We have Spurn point, which has the only full-time professionally manned lifeboat station in the United Kingdom. The crews are professional in their maintenance of the station, but the moment that they put their lives at risk in the lifeboats in the service of this country and its people, they are unpaid. Many medal winners for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution have served and worked at that point.

We have the largest onshore gas storage centre at Atwick. Indeed, at Aldbrough, we will have a larger still gas storage centre. I was interested—I hope non-controversially—to find when I went there just how low our gas stores become at the end of a winter. One thing that I hope to look at while in the House is the possibility of a strategic gas reserve for this country, so that industry or even households do not suffer from our running out of that vital substance.

The constituency has a large community with a predominantly agricultural and rural flavour. I am grateful for the fact that it is home to a farmer, Sam Walton, who is editor of *Pig World*. I thank him for taking me on a tour of farms in the area, and the National Farmers Union for helping me likewise.

Up from Spurn point, the Holderness coastline is one of the fastest eroding in Europe. My constituents want greater justice for the people whose homes, businesses and livelihoods are being drawn into the sea without compensation. It is a complex area, but I hope that the House can consider it. I know that hon. Members have discussed the issue and considered a fairer means of treating people who are paying a price for a natural process.

As has been said by other Members who represent rural areas, infrastructure is so important. Our area has an older than average population, yet they have

inadequate public transport to link them to public services. It may take two or even three bus rides to reach the hospitals. We are lucky, however, in having community hospitals in Withernsea, Hornsea and Beverley. I was delighted to read in the Labour party's manifesto that it is committed to supporting community hospitals. It is all the more worrying, therefore, to find that the local primary care trust, which has a large deficit that is estimated to rise from more than £6 million to more than £8 million, is reviewing those hospitals, with the threat of closure. That was the No. 1 issue raised with me during the election campaign.

To follow my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree, in the national arena it is the plight of pensioners that particularly affects me and which I would like us to change. I am yet to meet the person—certainly in Beverley and Holderness, of any political persuasion and of none—whose vision of life is of paying taxes throughout their working life and contributing to society, and whose aspiration at the end of it is to have to fill out a 24-page council tax benefit form and a 12-page pension credit form in order to get enough money on which to live.

From talking to those in the new wave of Conservative Members, if I may call it that—it is certainly the first major new contingent of Conservative MPs since 1983—I believe that, regardless of traditional left-right politics, they are looking to meld a commitment to social justice with the traditional commitment to freedom and the belief that the Government should do less and set people free. I will work with colleagues to target that message. It is a message not to benefit the rich but to lift those on lower earnings.

I pay tribute to the commitment of Labour Members who are entirely sincere in their desire for a more socially just country. I even pay tribute to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his efforts to try to lift those on the lowest pay. To some extent, he has been successful. However, the labyrinthine and complex system that has resulted means that a bus driver in my constituency who wants to improve his life and that of his family receives after deductions from his family credit just £1.97 an hour. That is not a vision of social justice; it is one of people trapped by a state that is holding them back. I hope that cross-party we can work to dismantle that, set people free and remove them from unnecessary interference—be they young or old, at the start of their career or at the end of it. If, regardless of party affiliation, we all work for that form of social justice during our time in this place, we will have done good work.

7.16 pm

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to catch your eye and giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech in the House of Commons. Whatever any of us may have done before coming to this House, speaking in the Chamber for the first time is a nerve-racking moment, and I am therefore grateful for the courtesies that the House extends to new Members during their maiden speech.

I feel a particular sense of nervousness coming after the hon. Members for Bristol, East (Ms McCarthy), for Newport, East (Jessica Morden) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark), and my hon. Friends the Members for Shipley (Philip Davies), for Braintree (Mr. Newmark), for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) and for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart), who all gave accomplished speeches.

The hon. Member for Newport, East spoke with great charm about her constituency and with great force about her passion for social justice. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran follows in the distinguished footsteps of Brian Wilson and a hero of mine, Sir Fitzroy Maclean. She is a worthy follower in that tradition. She spoke without notes but with great fluency and conviction. The hon. Member for Bristol, East also follows in distinguished footsteps, and she lived up to that in a speech of great wit and authority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree spoke with great force and persuasiveness. He gave a maiden speech in the best traditions of the House and I congratulate him. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley gave a witty and forthright speech which I greatly admired, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough gave a personally powerful and principled speech on which I congratulate him. My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness also spoke without notes but with tremendous aplomb and authority. I wish them all well in their careers in the House.

This Bill is of particular concern to my constituency of Surrey Heath, which is an economically vibrant home to both multinational companies and a wealth of small and medium-sized enterprises. There have been a number of distinguished contributions to this debate. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), as befits a former Foreign Officer Minister, ranged far and wide in his remarks. Other Members, such as the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne), were rather more tightly focused. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope to be a little less than tightly focused and to use this opportunity to look at the broader themes underlying the Finance Bill.

As the son of a small business man who ran a flourishing fish merchants in Aberdeen, at a time when that city's fishing industry was in ruder health than today, I know personally how regulation and legislation conceived from the best of motives can stifle enterprise and limit opportunity.

Any opportunities that I have in life I owe to my parents and to the sacrifices that they made. They adopted me when I was just four months old, and I was fortunate therefore to be raised in a secure and loving home. That has left me with a profound sense of the importance of helping families to withstand all the pressures placed on them by modern life, and I hope in my time in this House to do what I can to improve the lives of children born to disadvantage and to support all parents in the difficult but immensely rewarding task of raising families.

Before turning to the legislation that is before us, I should like to pay tribute to my predecessor as MP for Surrey Heath, Nick Hawkins. Nick served for 13 years in this House, first as Member for Blackpool, South and latterly as MP for Surrey Heath. During his time here, Nick set an example as a diligent and caring constituency MP, as well as a robust and principled scrutineer of legislation. During my time as a

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parliamentary candidate and in my brief weeks as an MP, I have met many constituents for whom Nick was an indefatigable champion; he set a standard that it would be difficult to match. I also know, not least from his many friends still in this House, how valuable Nick's sharp legal brain was in the scrutiny of legislation. Nick's belief in defending the principles of our common law and standing up for the liberty of the individual do him great credit, and I wish him well in the legal career to which he has now returned.

Following in Nick's footsteps is a challenge, but it is made far easier by the charm and friendliness of the people of Surrey Heath. It is both an honour and a pleasure to represent the most attractive and vibrant constituency in the county judged by "Country Life" to be England's most beautiful. I know that there may be some dissent among my hon. Friends, but as a flinty Scot, and someone who therefore judges English beauty with an unclouded eye, I can only say that I concur with the judgment of "Country Life". Surrey is indeed God's own county; it combines the best of England's civic traditions with large areas of still unspoilt rural charm.

Camberley is the largest town in my constituency. I am sure that memories of it will be dear to those hon. and gallant Members who passed through the Royal Military academy or the Staff college, both of which lie in its precincts. Camberley's particular charms are not, however, known only to those who pass through the RMA's gates. Thanks to John Betjeman's most famous poem, "A Subaltern's Love Song", the romance of Camberley is well known:

"nine-o'clock Camberley, heavy with bells,

And mushroomy, pine-woody, evergreen smells"

is how he immortalised that beautiful town. While the scent of Camberley is now tinged with the odour of fumes from the M3, which cuts a swathe through my constituency, there is a still a pine-woody and evergreen quality to the town that is very pleasing to this Scottish exile.

John Betjeman is not the only great writer to have drawn inspiration from the air of Surrey Heath. John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera" draws on the history of Bagshot heath in my constituency as a haunt of highwaymen and cutpurses. "The Beggar's Opera" is a satire in which comparisons are drawn between the highwaymen of 18th-century Surrey and the politicians of 18th-century England; both, John Gay suggests, were charming rogues who made it their business to deprive honest citizens of hard-earned money, only to squander the plunder on their own vanities. I will leave it to other Members to decide what relevance, if any, John Gay's insights have to discussion of this Finance Bill.

One area where I believe that public investment continues to be more necessary than ever is in our security, and I want to touch briefly on that matter. The contribution of the military to the life of my constituency has been, and continues to be, immensely valuable. As well as the Royal Military academy, Surrey Heath also benefits from our association with the military in many other ways. Our excellent local hospital, Frimley Park, works closely with the Royal Army Medical Corps to provide a matchless service for the whole community. We also house the headquarters of the Royal Army Logistics Corps, and it was on the heathland of the Chobham ridges that the world-famous Chobham armour was developed, which has helped to give our armed forces the protection that they need on the field of battle.

I hope that during my time in this House I can play a small part in giving our forces the support that they richly deserve. Britain's contribution to extending the cause of liberty has been distinguished, and it is a source of pride to me. In a proper spirit of bipartisanship, I pay tribute to this Government for their role in defending the cause of freedom in Sierra Leone, Kosovo and Iraq. I hope that it will not be considered wrong of me, however, to pledge that I shall use my position here to ensure that in future those who risk their lives on our behalf are given all the support—political, moral and financial—that they need.

The tradition of public service that the military exemplifies is richly alive in many other ways in my constituency. We have some of the best state schools in the country, a superb hospital in Frimley Park, as I said, and thriving voluntary organisations as well as active parish councils that serve our more rural communities such as Chobham, West End, Bisley, Bagshot and Windlesham. But the quality of life that the people of Surrey Heath enjoy and have done so much themselves to maintain is, I fear, threatened by insensitive overdevelopment. Plans to build tens of thousands of new homes in our area, imposed by an unelected and unwanted regional authority, combined with planning guidance that demands an increase in housing density, is wholly detrimental to the character of our communities and risks placing great strain on already overstretched public services.

I firmly believe that all parties in this House in the past 25 years have ensured that power has become too centralised. Decisions are now taken at too distant and remote a level. Intimate questions of planning should be decided by the local people most affected. Planning decisions affect the social capital that individuals and communities have built up over generations. That is why planning law must be seen to be fair, responsive and sensitive. In Surrey Heath, like many other rural areas, we have suffered as a consequence of a small minority—I must stress, a very small minority—of Travellers, who have defied the planning rules by setting up unauthorised encampments on greenfield sites. I hope, while in this House, to be able to change the law in such a way as to ensure the fair application of planning rules. I appreciate the contribution that Britain's travelling community has made to our national life over many generations, but equality before the law is the best guarantee of civilised treatment for all.

As I said, one of the many attractive features of Surrey Heath is its economic vibrancy. We are lucky to have in the constituency a wealth of local entrepreneurs, including Bob Potter OBE, whose Lakeside hotel in Frimley Green is globally renowned as the home of the world darts championship, thus demonstrating that one does not have to risk going on to Ministry of Defence property in Surrey Heath to see targets being hit with rare skill.

We are also fortunate in employment terms in the opportunities offered to us by multinational companies that serve my constituency, such as Eli Lilly, BAE, Novartis and S. C. Johnson. All those companies are

excellent corporate citizens playing a valued part in the life of the community as well as generating jobs, wealth and taxes for the Exchequer. It is with their contribution in mind that I want to say a few words about the precise measures in the Bill.

I recognise the need for legislation to reform the tax system and to limit tax avoidance, and there are many provisions in the Bill that may take us in the right direction, but I am concerned that in their zeal to regulate the Government may risk damaging Britain's competitive position. Retrospective and arbitrary changes to the tax code do not contribute to the atmosphere of stability and certainty that encourages investment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) pointed out, chapter 4 and clause 39 give cause for concern, as they seem to create the power for arbitrary and retrospective application of the Revenue's powers. I find that a worrying element of the Bill.

Historians of this House will know that our finest hour came in the 17th century, when we in Parliament insisted on limiting the arbitrary powers of the Executive to impose taxation. In that battle between king and Parliament, I have no hesitation in saying that Parliament was on the right side. I know that the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr. Brown) sometimes revels in his reputation as a roundhead; it is a great pity that in this legislation he should be so cavalier with the tax code.

To my mind, the best way of preventing tax avoidance—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge—is through tax simplification. At a time when economies in eastern Europe are making themselves more attractive to international investment by radically simplifying their tax codes, we should not go down the road of further complicating our own tax system.

I believe that my constituency has equipped itself well for the challenges of the 21st century by staying true to eternal British virtues—keeping what is cherishable and distinctive, celebrating excellence, having a pride in tradition, but always looking outwards. I hope that we can adopt a similar approach as a nation. Our economic strength has been built on sound traditions and an awareness of the importance of low and simple taxation, light and flexible regulation and wise and prudent investment. When we stray from those traditions, we undermine our future prosperity.

I want to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your indulgence in calling me, and in particular, I want to thank very much the people of Surrey Heath for giving me the opportunity to serve them in this Chamber.

7.30 pm

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) on his maiden speech. To have so fluently managed to combine poetry, darts and the Finance Bill is a rare feat. We are not really surprised by his abilities, but we were very much impressed. May I also congratulate all the other maiden speakers today? I must say, however, that the new hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart) intimidated me greatly by suggesting that the Prime Minister might try to emulate Henry V. May I suggest that that is not an example that we wish to put forward to this or any other Prime Minister.

I hesitated to speak in this debate today, on the ground that just about everything had been said, if not yet by everybody, but there are two issues on which I want to touch briefly.

First, I want to return to the issue of the new capacity under the Bill, presuming that it becomes law, to hold in self-invested personal pensions residential real estate—with various safeguards, I understand. The issue for me is not so much tax avoidance, although that, and the possible impact on tax revenue, worries me, but the potential for pension mis-selling. When we consider pension mis-selling, we tend to focus very much on single instruments and on whether the risk associated with a particular instrument has been declared to people. We are all aware, however, that risk refers to the whole portfolio of assets that people hold.

One only needs to look in today's newspapers, and yesterday's newspapers, to see that many of those who will try to sell those new pension products are gearing up to take advantage of the preference of many people in the UK for holding real estate, especially residential real estate, and to buy into property as the safest and most secure type of investment. Many of those people will already be exposed to the real estate market through their mortgages, and their families in turn will be exposed through their mortgages, and they will now be encouraged strongly, because of such opportunities, to expose themselves through their pension funds to the mortgage and housing market, without necessarily being given the appropriate kinds of advice. Can we have some assurance from the Government that real care will be exercised to make sure that we do not enter into another round of significant pension mis-selling as a result of those expanded opportunities?

Secondly, on an entirely separate and broader issue, I was very disappointed that neither the first part of the Finance Bill prior to the election nor the second one after the election addressed one of the key financing issues in this country today—funding for major infrastructure projects. There has been a lack of success in terms of delivering major infrastructure projects—I speak with a London hat on as well as with my constituency hat on. It seems to me that the Government have missed the opportunity in the Bill to bring forward mechanisms that would allow public authorities to finance new and vital forms of infrastructure through taxes on the windfall increases in land values and rental that occur near new public works.

Everybody in the House will be aware of the history of developers obtaining about £13 billion as a consequence of public investment in the Jubilee line—the initial investment was about £3.5 billion. That was a huge gain to the private sector, to which it contributed relatively only a few pennies—£180 million would be the exact figure. Raising finance for Crossrail, a much-needed project in London, is now proving exceedingly difficult—an experience repeated for projects all over the country. I am sad that the Bill has failed to seize the opportunity to take advantage of the potential gains that I have identified.

I hope that those issues can be addressed when the Minister winds up the debate or on another occasion.

7.35 pm

Mrs. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I address the House with a degree of trepidation on such a difficult and technical matter as a Finance Bill. I might not be giving my maiden speech today, but I assure Members that maiden speech plus one is still an intimidating task to face.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of extolling the beauties of my constituency to the House, and of regaling the House with some obscure facts about it. I therefore decided to start in a similar vein on this matter—with the obscure. If Members will forgive my pronunciation of Latin, I will talk first about what is known as the Societas Europaea—the European company statute. It is covered by clauses 51 to 65 of the Bill, and is a scheme that has been in operation since October 2004 to allow people to set up pan-European companies. It is useful for the House to examine how the scheme has been operating, as it is an interesting case study in how things get done in the European Union and the problems that have occurred with single market legislation.

The scheme starts out as an inoffensive and even fairly good idea to allow companies to cut costs by having a single incorporation that will operate throughout Europe, rather than having to have different companies incorporated in different member states. A positive aspect of the scheme is that it is voluntary—it is an option for business to take up if it wants to do so; it is not compulsory. The less good news is that it took nearly 40 years to agree in the European Union—even longer than the notoriously long-drawn-out chocolate directive—which shows that decision-making processes there still leave a lot to be desired.

Another aspect of the scheme covered by the Bill is that the end result is cumbersome and bureaucratic, as one might expect of a scheme that took 30 years to agree. As a result, few companies have taken the opportunity to opt into the scheme. The EU legislative scheme has failed to produce an attractive framework for business to use, and companies are currently voting with their feet—the Economic Secretary will correct me if I am wrong—and opting for national corporate registration rather than this new EU-wide scheme, reinforcing the practical advantages of national decision making and national jurisdiction.

There is another lesson to be learned from this long-running saga, however, which has direct relevance to the Bill that we are considering today. If we examine the debates on the European company statute in the European Parliament, we see that almost every speaker called urgently for a European system of corporate taxation to match the European company statute that they had just created. In that, as in many other areas, measures introduced on the basis of trade and the single market are being used as vehicles to drive forward tax harmonisation and an expansion of the EU's role in tax. I fundamentally oppose that, as does everyone on the Conservative Benches. In pushing forward EU political integration and tax harmonisation by a series of such small, technical steps, that integration is disguised from public scrutiny. It has been described as a salami-slice approach—by a series of different technical measures, the EU seeks to enlarge its role in all sorts of areas of our national life, including tax, without drawing the attention of the people to what is happening.

In the tax area, the real threat is posed by the European Court of Justice. There is every danger, as we have heard already in this debate, that the proposals in the Bill on the taxation system to be applied to the European company statute might not be worth the paper on which they are written. The European Court of Justice might simply choose to overturn them, as it has done in a number of instances in relation to UK tax measures. I remind the House that that means instant, immediate tax harmonisation: no debate, no elections, no scrutiny and no referendums. It means instant EU involvement, and expanding involvement, in our taxation.

Her Majesty's Treasury has repeatedly, especially in recent years, expressed its opposition to further EU involvement in tax harmonisation. I *should like to hear* what the Minister and the Government propose to do to curb the power of the European Court of Justice. Will they take action if the Court continues to strike down British tax laws such as the one that the Government are presenting to the House today? What will they do if the UK Government lose the Marks and Spencer case, and the many others that await judgment in Luxembourg?

Labour loves to say that it is extreme to criticise the remit of the European Court of Justice and extreme to call for curbs on it, but I cannot believe that Her Majesty's Treasury is not concerned about the inroads into its revenue that are increasingly being made by the many cases finding their way through the Court in Luxembourg. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), the problem involves not just the European company provisions in the Bill but a number of others.

Let me turn from one rather low-profile topic to another. Clause 37 and schedule 6 are fairly obscure and technical, but they are part of a bigger and more important project: the implementation of international accounting standards in this country. I welcome the fact that, in this draft, the Government have responded to many of the concerns of the securitisation industry—which, while not enjoying a high profile, plays an important part in our financial markets, and consequently in the economic health of the nation.

I supported the international accounting standards project, which represents a move towards a single global accounting standard. I consider it desirable because it will hopefully cut costs for business, and enhance transparency for investors by allowing them readily to compare the accounts of different companies and different investments in different countries. The real value of the scheme, however, can be realised only if it becomes a global and internationally accepted standard. It has been adopted in theory in the European Union, although the implementation process is slow. What we really need to do is ensure that there is a transatlantic consensus on international accounting standards.

At one stage it seemed that it would be impossible to reach such an agreement. The United States was perfectly happy with its accounting system, and was not interested in anyone else's. Recent corporate scandals have caused it to look at its systems afresh, and to adopt a positive approach to international accounting standards. That gave rise to a political opportunity, but following such a promising development it seems that the wheels are in danger of falling off the IAS project. Given the controversy over IAS 39, the standard on

derivatives, there is every danger that the EU will dilute the international standard that it has only just adopted. In departing from that gold international standard, it risks creating a European gap and an IAS lite, and losing its political opportunity to build the transatlantic convergence that could save businesses many hundreds of thousands of pounds: they would no longer have to compile separate accounts for their branches in north America and in Europe. I urge the Government to press that important issue in both Brussels and Washington.

Let me now deal with the more high-profile issues relating to the way in which our economy is working. Many speakers have touched on them already today. Clauses 16 to 23 deal with taxation of investment funds. I share many of the anxieties expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge about the extent of delegation to secondary legislation. Over the past 30 years, there has been a massive increase in the amount of such legislation. We need only visit a law library to see that the number of slim volumes containing secondary legislation, such as statutory instruments, covering most of the century has expanded massively over the past 20 or 30 years. I believe that that is bad for our democracy. In taxation matters above all, we should maximise democratic scrutiny and maximise transparency. I believe that delegation to secondary legislation is particularly dangerous when it involves measures to remove money from people's pockets.

I cannot contribute to a debate on finance, especially one that covers taxation of investment even in this technical way, without referring to what I consider to be the most important financial and economic issue facing the country: the crisis in savings, investments and pensions. I am profoundly concerned about the collapse in saving and the crisis in our pensions system. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart), I believe that a number of the Government's economic decisions have been correct and could not be opposed by anyone. The Government have displayed a degree of common sense, most notably in giving independence to the Bank of England. However much we might debate aspects of the Government's record, one thing seems clear to me. When Labour was elected, Britain had some of the strongest pensions in Europe; now we have some of the weakest. In this country, we are saving about a third less than we were when Labour was elected in 1997. Estimates of the shortfall vary, but it seems likely that Britain should be saving about £27 billion a year more to be sure of a safe and secure old age for its people.

I am afraid that this Government must take their share of responsibility: responsibility for the extra £5 billion annual tax that they have imposed on pension savings, for the abolition of personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts, for their refusal to abolish the annuity rules, and above all for the massive increase in means-testing—a subject dealt with in a number of today's maiden speeches.

For every £1 of income from savings, a pensioner can lose up to 90p in means-tested benefits. Given such an excessively high level of marginal taxation on savings income, is it any wonder that savings have collapsed in this country? I return to the subject of our debate, the taxation of investment and arrangements for taxation. I strongly believe that the only way in which to tackle the current crisis effectively is to encourage people to save by giving them a tax incentive: not more obfuscation, not more complexity, but real, substantial tax rewards for those who are responsible, who do the right thing, who save and provide for their old age.

As I have said, in some respects the Government have made the right decisions for the economy. I have even been known to make common cause with the Treasury in my former role as a Member of the European Parliament. When it comes to savings and pensions, however, I genuinely believe that the Government are failing, and failing badly. Pensioner hardship is a serious problem today, but it is set to become infinitely worse unless we take action now. The Government are *building poverty into the DNA* of our economy, and creating a pensioner underclass for the future. Whatever the content of this Bill, I urge them to take serious action in their next Finance Bill to remedy what I see as the gravest and most serious economic threat facing us today.

7.48 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in such an important debate. Despite the haste with which I think the Bill was drawn up, dissected and delivered to the House, it will affect many people in their working lives and many hard-working people in their later lives, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers). It will determine the competitiveness of British business both here and abroad. It will have an impact not just on the good will of charitable people, but on the good work that charities do. I shall say more about that shortly.

I thank the Paymaster General for her clear explanation of the Bill. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) for raising the issue of charitable donations and gift aid. That is the issue on which I want to concentrate.

The Finance Bill is perhaps one of the most important Bills in the Queen's Speech. It is disappointing that there is so little time to debate such an important measure in this House. It is complex, as many previous speakers today have observed, and although it has been truncated it still runs to some 160 pages. I do not believe that four hours is enough time to examine all those pages. I am confident that, when it is considered in Committee, Members in all parts of the House will give the detail very serious consideration, irrespective of party politics. Indeed, it is in some of the Bill's detail that the devil lies.

I have chosen to contribute today because this Bill needs further fine-tuning and refinement. Although it contains some sensible measures on closing tax-avoidance loopholes, they are complex and I am concerned that they receive proper scrutiny. We must be sure that the Government do not drive through tax-avoidance measures that further erode British businesses' competitiveness, act as a disincentive for overseas firms to invest here, or create burdens for all businesses that undermine productivity and negate the benefits that will hopefully be gained from such tax-avoidance measures.

[Adam Afriyie]

Lest we forget, British businesses are the engine of our economy. They generate all the jobs, incomes and taxes that make for a good society. British businesses, in a way, are the golden goose of our economy.

Mr. Ellwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that the over-regulation imposed by this Government is stifling British businesses, which are calling for simpler and less regulation, rather than for more and more complex regulation?

Adam Afriyie: I agree wholeheartedly. My background is in business, and it is clear that the Government, via the European Union, have allowed in swathes of detailed regulations and guidance notes; indeed, there are some 100 pages on working time directives. The weight of that paperwork, regulation and red tape knocks out a whole layer of productivity in British businesses.

I turn to the charities, charitable giving and voluntary work that underpin our society. Giving is an expression of our humanity: it is an expression of the care that we have for others who may be less fortunate than ourselves. It is also an expression, for charities that focus on these areas, of our concern to preserve and promote our natural environment and heritage. Hundreds of charities are based in or operate in my Windsor constituency. The Windsor, Ascot and Maidenhead volunteers' organisation encourages voluntary work throughout the constituency. The friends of the King Edward VII hospital provide voluntary help to support our local hospitals. The Thames Valley hospice and the Paul Bevan hospice—now combined—would cease to function without charitable giving and the work of hundreds of selfless volunteers and helpers. And of course, in terms of gift aid we should consider Windsor castle, to which clause 11 is particularly relevant.

Thousands of people work voluntarily for these charities and good causes. They give of their time freely and willingly to help others, to preserve our national heritage and to protect and promote our environment and historic buildings. Of course, thousands of people give to charities as a way of expressing their good nature and good will to others. Charities, voluntary organisations and trusts are the fabric of a healthy society. On this basis, I want to draw the House's attention to clause 11 of the current Finance Bill and, by way of background, to section 25 of the Finance Act 1990, which provided tax relief or gift aid for qualifying gifts from individuals making donations to a charity.

Broadly speaking, the 1990 Act defined a qualifying gift as a monetary gift that was non-refundable and was not used to buy an asset. Section 25(2)(e) made it clear that the person making a donation could not receive a benefit outside of prescribed limits. An individual donating up to £100 to a charity could receive a benefit of no more than 25 per cent. For a donation of up to £1,000, the benefit had to be no more than £25, and for donations in excess of £1,000, the maximum benefit to the individual concerned had to be no more than £250. In the Finance Act 2000, a special exemption for certain charities was laid down in subsection 39(5E), enabling them to bestow a right of admission to view certain charitable properties. Charities with that exemption are listed in subsection 39(5F). They consist of those whose main purpose is to preserve heritage property or to conserve wildlife for public benefit.

The problem is that this exemption remains in place, despite the changes made to the gift aid scheme in the Finance Act 2000. This is perhaps an example of insufficiently far-reaching Commons scrutiny of an incoming Act. The result is that a payment for admission is now eligible for gift aid. To put it simply, certain charities can offer free admission to certain properties equal to the entrance fee, and then claim gift aid on that contribution. That was not the intention of the Act, and although it is legal it is certainly unfair that certain heritage and wildlife charities benefit in this way.

Clause 11 of the current Bill aims to stop this inadvertent tax benefit of gift aid, if that gift allows the giver entry to an establishment of a certain type. My concern is that removing the benefit without proper scrutiny and consideration might cause some valuable charities to struggle, perhaps to falter, and even to fail in certain cases. Insufficient consideration has been given to the immediate effect of closing this gift aid loophole. Many charities may depend on the gift aid generated by allowing free admission, and they may experience a sudden drop in income. Just as the gift aid loophole was an unintended consequence of past Finance Acts, so this sudden failure of charities could be an unintended consequence of the current Finance Bill.

The charities concerned are doing their law-abiding business in undertaking good work in society. I am sure that it is not intended that this good work and these charities fail, so I ask the House that consideration be given in Committee to transitional arrangements, or to delaying introducing the proposed change to the gift aid scheme, so that the charities affected can have time to re-work their finances and to continue their good work. Such work is enjoyed not only by Members of this House, but by people throughout the country. I would hate them to be deprived of the pleasures of heritage, or of the charities that deal with our natural environment.

7.58 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): You called me to make my maiden speech two and a half weeks ago, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am extremely glad that you did. Compared with the eight or nine that I have heard today, it would have paled into insignificance.

Earlier today, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) gave us his views on the principles that backed up the first Finance Bill and this one. I recognise one or two trends in this Bill that form part of the Government's taxation policy theme. The tax burden is falling increasingly on those who do not have votes, by whom I mean this country's business community. Most of the rules effected in this Bill will impact on the business climate. Moreover, an environment is being created in which decisions are being made for taxation reasons, rather than for those relating to economic and business decisions.

It is also clear from the first Finance Bill and this one that the tax burden is increasingly falling in such a way that other people can be blamed for tax increases. A good example, which several Members have already mentioned, is the council tax. As a former local councillor, I know that there is lower central

Government funding, greater regulation and pressure for increased planning. We have also seen council tax rises. The Bill continues those themes of taxation. The other discernible trend that is coming through is complexity. The hon. Member for Wirral, West (Stephen Hesford) said that he thought that there were simple principles behind the legislation. There are over 250 pages of guidance on the Bill. It does not seem that it can be described as simple.

The increasing complexity of the whole tax system means that there are vast areas that no one can really understand. Small businesses and sole traders are spending increasing amounts of hard-earned income to get professional advisers to unravel tax legislation. Anything that is done by business now seems to require costly and detailed legal advice and that is starting to distort the economic basis in favour of larger firms. My hon. Friends the Members for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) and for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) mentioned the need to simplify the taxation process. That is something that we should all support.

The other general trend in the Bill is that quite a lot of the provisions are presented as anti-avoidance measures. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) mentioned what the shadow Chancellor said about part 1. We agree with the Government about the need to tackle avoidance, but clauses 24 and 31 do not necessarily do so. They are widely drafted clauses that potentially have significant consequences for our international competitiveness and inward investment, which is the key to future economic success and which could be damaged. A number of perfectly innocent transactions may be caught by the provisions. I am an economist by training and a financier by profession. I expect that I will struggle with the complexity of those clauses, should I have the fortune to be on the Committee.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North gave his wide-ranging views on the Bill and some economic history. He proved that economic history can be made to make any point one likes. As the Chancellor recognised in his Budget speech this year, we have had 50 quarters of growth—it is 51 now—so it is highly likely that the macro-economic climate did not change on 1 May 1997. Those people who have had the fortune to read the exposition by the former chief economist of the Institute of Directors will know that the inflation-targeting process, the interest rate decision-making process and the process to bring clarity and transparency started well before 1997.

An interesting fact to reflect on is that although much is made of the success and strength of economic growth, a number of City reports recently have suggested that the huge increases in taxation since 1997 have raised Government expenditure, which has boosted the underlying growth rates by about 1 per cent. over eight years. Were taxation to be raised to fill the hole that my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge mentioned, we would expect to see a drop in the underlying growth rate of the economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) talked about gift aid. Like Windsor, Wimbledon has many small charities, some small museums and charitable premises containing exhibitions. I think particularly of the Wimbledon Society museum and the Wandle industrial museum. Many of those organisations have used the current rules that allow gifts to be equal to admission fees and to be taken as gift aid—the charity offers free admission and reclaims the gift aid tax relief. That will now be altered. That is probably correct in that that was not the original intention of the gift aid legislation, although a number would argue that the rules should be relaxed so that small museums and small premises showing these artefacts can survive.

Having read the legislation, it seems that there will still be allowable donations for the right of entry to qualify for gift aid if the donation is generally available, if the donor takes in one or more members of his family, if the right of admission is for over one year and if the gift is the fee plus 10 per cent. I am sure that there will be support for widening the measure to include charities that display plants, works of art and other artefacts. When the Bill is considered in Committee, I hope that the Government will consider making amendments to that clause. The legislation refers only to viewing those artefacts. In the 21st century, a number of museums, including small museums, have interactive and hands-on displays for young children. The way the clause is drafted would exclude them.

I wonder why the provision is limited to the donor plus one or more members of his family. Like a number of hon. Members, I have children. We sometimes take groups of children that are not members of my family to local museums. Perhaps the Government will consider widening the provision to include such groups. I accept that there should be a limit, but I hope that they will consider that matter. I am not entirely clear why the right of entry should be for the whole year. Three months would cover that adequately. I hope that the Government will look at that in Committee.

As I said, I spent the whole of my professional life in the financial world. Obviously, I approve of the City, which is a major source of investment wealth and funding. Therefore, I am particularly interested in some of the clauses in chapter 3. Much of that will be examined in detail in Committee, but, like my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, I have noted the huge increase in the number of statutory instruments that are coming through. Many of the changes in the Bill will be dealt with by statutory instrument, not primary legislation.

There are concerns that the changes in clause 16 will have little revenue impact. There is due to be a reform of fund taxation within the next two or three years. It seems that these are interim changes. However, there are some huge cost implications for the industry. It would be easy not to bring clause 16 forward.

Clauses 24 to 31 fall into the category that I mentioned earlier: presentationally, they are anti-avoidance measures. There are a number of ways in which they could be enacted but, having read the Bill, and I am sure I will be corrected if I am wrong, it seems that the rules will apply in this way. If an American or other multinational company decides to build a factory in this country and create jobs, that could be financed by a bank and it would attract tax relief for the interest paid to the bank. However, if the Americans, or whoever, choose to finance the investment through lending from their own US parent company and in that way receive a subsidy from the American taxpayer for the investment

[Stephen Hammond]

in the UK, UK tax relief is unchanged. The only difference is that the American taxpayer is helping to finance the investment in Britain.

I believe that the new legislation and the guidance suggest that, in that case, UK tax relief will be denied. That seems to be simply because there is a subsidy from the American taxpayer. Without that subsidy, the loan might not be granted and the factory might not be built. Should we be concerned that the American taxpayer is providing that subsidy? I do not think so. I am not sure of the economic rationale behind that. The stance being taken on tax arbitrage in all circumstances must be bad. The effect of the new rules is to create uncertainty for UK multinationals, as some hon. Members have mentioned.

The legislation will affect the UK as the international policeman on the funding of debt through hybrid entities. Other tax authorities may gain revenue at the expense of UK investors. Those who choose those entities may then choose a different location to take their tax deduction. We may therefore see an expense to the UK investor and some gain in revenues for tax authorities abroad. That further hinders the prospects of inward investment.

The anti-avoidance clauses give huge discretionary powers to the Inland Revenue to give notices to taxpayers. They seem to be arbitrary, which is understandable, but they create uncertainty. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) said, he wants to see certainty and an appeal process. He also wants a clearance process initially. It seems to me that that is only fair. Notices are, by their very nature, individual and one cannot necessarily guarantee the same treatment to two identical taxpayers. I hope that we shall examine that further in Committee. When we debate the Bill in Committee, I hope that Treasury Ministers will be able to provide some clear interpretations as to the manner in which the clauses will be enacted, along with some practical examples of how they expect them to work.

8.11 pm

Mr. Lee Scott (Ilford, North) (Con): I congratulate all hon. Members on their maiden speeches.

I have been approached by a charity in my constituency of Ilford, North, which has brought to my attention problems surrounding old manuscripts and books. Would it be possible to clarify in the wind-up debate whether new subsection (5G) in clause 11 on gift aid would apply?

My second point concerns VAT on charities. I understand the difficulties, but I was saddened by the VAT provisions and wonder whether it would be possible to abolish them for charities where it could be proved that their programmes were based only in the UK and were oriented towards social, educational or welfare purposes. That would help many charities and would mean a saving of millions of pounds for them.

As a previous director of a charity—I declare an interest, as someone who is still involved in charities—I fully understand the problems that charities face. Programmes such as distance learning projects, which link schools across the world, create a better understanding not only of religious but of other means of charitable provision, and they certainly benefit the schools involved. A finite amount of money is available from philanthropy and any movement to provide further help would be welcome. As I have already said, I am fully aware of the financial difficulties that might be caused by my suggestion.

Until recently, I was a cabinet member for the community in the London borough of Redbridge, so I know that large sums of money are given to charities through the voluntary sector grants programme. The suggestion that I have made would mean that some of those grants would no longer be needed, so they could be given to other groups in the voluntary sector. That would provide a better use of the taxes raised both locally and nationally.

As I said at the start, I am fully aware of the potential problems, but, like myself, the Economic Secretary has also been involved in charities for many years and understands what they have to grapple with when they face VAT costs. I would really like the matter to be looked into further, notwithstanding the difficulties.

8.12 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk) (Con): We have had an excellent debate and heard some very good speeches, and I particularly welcome the maiden speeches from both sides of the House. We started off with a speech from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), who referred to the taxation of pensions in clauses 7 to 10.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne), who brings considerable experience from his time as an MEP to this place, so we welcome his contributions. He spoke about growth rates in the EU, about the impact of house prices and house liabilities. He also referred—it is an important issue, if slightly outside the confines of the Bill—to self-invested personal pensions and the whole "home to let" relationship. It is a matter of controversy and will undoubtedly be debated in the public domain.

I would argue, however, that it has become such an important issue because of the severe pressure on individuals to restore decent pensions for themselves. That has become a huge difficulty now in this country and I hope that the hon. Member for Eastleigh would concede that, if we go back eight years, the issue was not in the public domain or shared among the people of this country. Their anxieties were much less then, which says much about the collapse of savings, the attack by the current Chancellor on the pensions industry and, in a sense, the perfectly legitimate desire of people to put money into property in order to secure a decent income for their old age. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we must look carefully into the problem in order to prevent any abuses, but we also need to understand how it has all happened—a development that none of us can welcome.

The hon. Member for Newport, East (Jessica Morden)—unfortunately, she is no longer in her place—made her maiden speech and spoke warmly about Alan Howarth, the previous Member, who is now, I understand, in the House of Lords. Indeed, he is well known as a personable individual, well liked on both sides of the House. I understand that he is the second of

her predecessors who has entered the other place. She spoke about the history of Newport, the Chartist movement and the importance of local industry, and she used the term "economic renaissance" to characterise the new businesses entering her constituency that have brought employment growth. In my view, the hon. Lady delivered a confident and well presented speech. When she enters the Chamber, I will have the opportunity of wishing her well in her parliamentary career. I am sure that she will make a valuable contribution to our debates.

It is always a great pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies)—an outstanding and original thinker, who always presents telling arguments. He spoke about the abstruse nature of the Red Book, which has developed over the last few years, and he is entirely right about that. It is increasingly difficult to get to the essentials of what the Red Book is about. He also talked about worrying aspects of economic policy and argued, as widely asserted by many independent commentators, that the Chancellor appears to be losing the control over public expenditure that he has spoken about so often.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the rising tax burden in this country—5 per cent. of GDP over the last five years, which is an enormous increase by any historic standards. The current budget deficit is now substantial and the Chancellor's capacity to miss the forecasts does not bode well for the future. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right to say that rules must be effective and he ably challenged the Chancellor's interpretation of the so-called golden rule.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark) also made her maiden speech, in which she spoke passionately of her constituency. She was extremely articulate and talked about Keir Hardie being part of the history of her constituency. I sometimes wonder what Keir Hardie would make of current Labour politicians, who seem to spend their summers not helping trade unionists and others, but staying in princely Italian palazzos. That is certainly a very long way from Keir Hardie.

There seems to have been some genetic programming, which was apparent when the hon. Lady talked about her great-great grandfather being a pacifist and socialist. Once again, I wonder what her great-great grandfather would think of the current reign of the Prime Minister, soon coming to an end, in that context—*[Interruption.]* I see that the hon. Lady is now in her place, so I can tell her that I have been praising her for her confident and competent speech, including her comments about Keir Hardie and her great-great grandfather, which we all enjoyed hearing.

The hon. Lady also spoke about our presidency of the G8, about world poverty and, indeed, about the importance of the UK taking a lead in that matter. That view is shared on both sides of the House. Now that she is here, I would like to applaud her further and wish her well in her time in the House. I know that she will make some excellent contributions to our debates.

It is always a great parliamentary treat to hear from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), who is a great parliamentary institution in himself. He talked about links to Scotland and about the need to strike a balance between desirable outcomes in the very complicated Bill before us. He said that he supported anti-avoidance measures, but also raised the valid point that he did not want to see any innocent person suffering by being brought into anti-avoidance measures because they were not properly defined. As a doughty defender of Northern Ireland, the hon. Gentleman went on to say that water and sewerage services there require urgent upgrading. That is long overdue, and I hope that the Government will say what progress is being made.

The hon. Member for Bristol, East (Ms McCarthy) also made her maiden speech this afternoon. She spoke about her predecessor, Jean Corston, a valued Member of this House who concentrated on human rights and who was a distinguished chair of the parliamentary Labour party. The hon. Lady talked about some of the individuals who were part of her constituency's history. They included Ernie Bevin, who started his career there and who is universally acclaimed as an outstanding Foreign Secretary in his day. She also mentioned Tony Benn and Sir Stafford Cripps. The latter was known for his frugality, and I wonder what he would have made of the lifestyles enjoyed by some Members of the Government Front Bench today. That would be an interesting revelation. However, the hon. Lady will clearly be a passionate defender and promoter of the city of Bristol and its rich history. I certainly wish her well in her time in the House.

It was a great pleasure to hear the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark). He refused to take no for an answer at the election before last, and came back to win his seat just over a month ago. That shows great strength of character, and his wealth of successful business experience will be greatly valued. It shone through very clearly in his speech this afternoon. He was rightly generous to his predecessor, Alan Hurst, and to my noble Friend Lord Newton, who will be remembered by many hon. Members with great affection as a dedicated Front Bencher, active both in the Cabinet and in the House. He really was greatly liked.

My hon. Friend spoke of the beautiful corner of England that he represents and he set out some of its history. He also mentioned the Anglo-American link that he embodies. Many of the original settlers in what became the United States came from the area covered by his constituency and mine. Many great parliamentarians, such as Churchill and Macmillan, shared his link with America, so we have high hopes and expectations for my hon. Friend. He talked too about the centralisation of public services—and I agree with him about that—and about the attack on our rural support structures. I am his near neighbour in parliamentary constituency terms, and I completely understand what he meant. He mentioned as well the terrible impact on pensioners and people on fixed incomes of the swingeing increases in council tax that have been especially devastating in constituencies such as ours. Quite rightly, he talked about the need to constrain the power of Government so that we can retain our competitiveness. After a maiden speech of that quality, we can expect many more excellent contributions from my hon. Friend in the years to come.

The hon. Member for Wirral, West (Stephen Hesford) made some rather uncharacteristically churlish comments about my hon. Friend's contribution. I think that the hon. Gentleman's opponent in the recent general election was Esther McVeigh, and his remarks call to mind a

[Mr. Richard Spring]

conversation between Winston Churchill and Nancy Astor—in this case, I think that the substance of that conversation applies in the reverse. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the Bill's complexity. He said that we would have to explore the anti-avoidance proposals in detail, and he was right to ask specifically about the amount of revenue that they would raise. I hope that the Financial Secretary will give the House some clarification when he winds up the debate.

It is always a great pleasure to listen to my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell). He is a very experienced politician, having held many distinguished offices in a previous Cabinet, and he brings to the House an understanding forged in a successful business career. That combination is all too rare. My right hon. Friend said that all hon. Members support well thought out anti-avoidance measures, and that that was linked to the Revenue having more discretion. As a quid pro quo, however, he said that we needed to look carefully at getting the balance right in respect of pre-decision tax clearance. He is absolutely right: the Revenue authorities must be more available to help businesses deal with matters such as tax arbitrage rules, for example. In that way, greater clarity can be brought to the planning process. I hope that my right hon. Friend will continue to contribute to debates such as this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) recently became a father, and I congratulate him on that, although I am not sure exactly when that happened. He spoke of his constituents' common sense and described himself as a straight-talking Yorkshireman. He spoke affectionately of Sir Marcus Fox, another great parliamentary character, and also paid generous tribute to his predecessor, Christopher Leslie. He was a fine Minister and, like my hon. Friend, I hope that he finds his way back to the House of Commons—but, also like my hon. Friend, not as the MP for Shipley. My hon. Friend said that he wanted to remain on the Back Benches. We shall see about that. He spoke of his business experience at Asda and about working for his mother. However, despite his modesty, it is clear from his excellent speech that he may be tested in an entirely different direction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) talked about how far he had travelled to reach the House of Commons. He described fighting Neil Kinnock in the Pudsey constituency, and spoke warmly about his predecessor, Paul Stinchcombe, who had sponsored Alexine's law. He spoke about his constituency and the problems encountered in his local hospital. He set out the pressures suffered by the road system in his area and he spoke about his constituents' fear of crime—a considerable problem all over the country.

My hon. Friend also spoke about visiting Cranwell and about the importance of putting our country first. He was right to do so, as he was to talk about the danger of elites becoming disconnected from their electorates. The events of the past few days entirely vindicate that observation. He said that the European elite was obviously out of touch and that that was underlined by the results of the recent referendums in Europe. The House will be aware that the British Government have chickened out of holding a referendum in this country for fear of being given a lesson about elitism. However, I hope that a referendum will be held in this country one day. My hon. Friend displayed a true and good Tory instinct when he said that we must put our country first, and I applaud him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart), in another excellent maiden speech, talked about the problem of dignity and means-testing. I do not seek to make a party political point, but it is true that many people, especially the elderly, find the bureaucracy in the process of claiming their legitimate benefits very difficult. The huge growth of means-testing in our country has also played an adverse part in the decline of savings. My hon. Friend spoke about his predecessor, James Cran, who was a kind and funny person whom I knew well. He was very popular here. My hon. Friend also described the undoubted beauties of his constituency, including the famous Beverley minster, and how he hoped the Prime Minister would take up the invitation to visit. Well, my hon. Friend can try to invite the Prime Minister, but I expect that he has other geographic issues on his mind at present. My hon. Friend also mentioned the lifeboats and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, a group of unsung heroes. He also talked about coastal erosion and the need to simplify the labyrinthine systems and overreaching bureaucracy that are part and parcel of our benefit system. I am truly delighted that he is now a parliamentary colleague and I know that he will make an excellent contribution to our debates.

I was very pleased to hear the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). For some time, he has surveyed the activities of this House as a journalist, casting an eagle eye on our debates and issues of policy. He did so with great perspicacity for many years. I am delighted that he is no longer an observer of our activities but part of them and I know that he will contribute richly to our proceedings. He talked about his constituency and the vibrant multinational companies located there, as well as the small companies. My hon. Friend talked movingly about his own family experience and the implications for it of a destructive bureaucracy. That has obviously provoked much thought on his part, and I entirely share his conclusions. He was very generous in talking of his predecessor, Nick Hawkins, whom he praised as a hard-working constituency MP with a sharp legal mind.

My hon. Friend talked about the beauty and charms of his constituency and he also mentioned, with reference to Camberley, the importance of the military in our national life, a comment that will have struck a chord with many hon. Members. At a time when many of our national institutions are under something of a cloud our armed forces are probably held in greater esteem than any other institution, and they deserve our support. My hon. Friend also talked about the pressures of overbuilding in the constituency, of the terrible centralisation of decision making on such matters and the inability of local people to have any real influence on what happens in their environment in planning matters. He warned of arbitrariness and retrospective application in clause 39, and he was right to talk about the need for low taxes, a simplified taxation system, light and flexible regulation and for this nation to be outward looking. I am delighted that he is now a parliamentary colleague and I know that he will be a great contributor to our debates.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Susan Kramer) warned of pension mis-selling and property linkage. The FSA is there to deal with that and I hope that the interests of investors will be protected with a lighter touch than has been the case. One has to ask why people are driven to such behaviour, and it is because of the decline in pensions as a factor in income, especially as people get older. It is to the eternal shame of this Government that what they inherited—probably the most generous, effective and well-funded pension system anywhere in Europe—has come to the present state. The hon. Lady also talked about money for infrastructure projects and she made an interesting suggestion, although I am not sure that it is Liberal Democrat policy, that windfall taxes should be levied on gains arising from property that rises in value as a result of infrastructure projects. That will be an interesting subject for discussion as the Liberal Democrats sort out their tax policy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) brings to the House her tremendous experience as a Member of the European Parliament. She was considered an outstanding MEP on Treasury matters. In the European Parliament she made a huge contribution and we got a flavour of her quality when she spoke today—she has already made her maiden speech. She talked about the European company statutes, clauses 51 to 65, to set up pan-European companies, and she warned that, although that will be voluntary, it will be very bureaucratic. As she said, after 30 years, most businesses favour national corporate registration as opposed to EU registration. She talked about the EU's encroachment on tax affairs, and she was absolutely right to talk about the role of the European Court of Justice in pushing forward tax harmonisation and to ask how its power could be curbed. She referred to the Marks and Spencer case, which will be an interesting one to follow.

Clause 37 refers to schedule 6 and the implementation of international accounting standards and I am pleased that the Government listened and have already amended the original Finance Act 2005. My hon. Friend talked about the need for transatlantic standards in accounting practices, and in respect of clauses 16 to 23, on the taxation of investment funds, she referred, as have others, to her concerns about the delegation to secondary legislation and the importance of proper scrutiny of all the proposals. She rightly emphasised, as I have sought to do in the last few minutes, the crisis in savings and pensions, which is in part due to the scourge of bureaucratic means-testing that has been so counter-productive in that regard.

It was excellent to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), who talked about the importance of examining the Bill's impact on businesses. He was right to say that our private sector is the engine of our economy; for charities, it is the golden goose and we should consider the weight of regulation. He referred to the charitable giving and gift aid provisions in clause 11 and their impact on the hospices in his constituency and, indeed, on Windsor castle. He wanted some clarification and we shall certainly be considering the implications of those proposals in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) spoke about the complexity of the tax system. Of course, that is desirable for anti-avoidance but we must look carefully at the implications for international competitiveness. He talked about the small charities and museums in his constituency and raised an important point about what the definition of the viewing of artefacts is and whether that needs examination. Indeed it does and we shall consider it in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) is an ex-director of a charity and he talked about old manuscripts and books. He asked whether clause 9 would apply and I hope that the Financial Secretary will refer to that when he winds up the debate.

As we consider the British economy, we can see that we have certainly come a long way from post-neoclassical endogenous growth theory. I looked up "endogenous" in the dictionary; it said "growing or originating from within". As we can see once again in the Finance Bill, what has certainly grown from within is the sheer, appalling complexity of our tax system—a culture in which announcements are made that leave everybody from ordinary citizens to business people in the dark, with professionals such as accountants and actuaries struggling to get to grips with what is happening. Whatever else the Chancellor's legacy may be, it will be the micro-management of the economy on a scale unprecedented in our history.

In Committee, we shall of course want clarity about retrospective or retroactive proposals. Naturally, illegitimate tax avoidance is something that nobody could support but we shall want to examine the entrails carefully.

In conclusion, of course anti-avoidance is at the heart of the Bill, but we shall want to examine it in detail in Committee and achieve a balance to ensure that anti-avoidance is clear and workable in practice. Undermining the attractions of the UK as a place to do business simply cannot be countenanced. We want to minimise arbitrary and unnecessary intrusiveness and to maximise the availability of pre-clearance to the taxpayer. We want to consider enhanced powers and the discretion of the Revenue, as in clauses 24 and 26 on tax arbitrage. We want a fair quid pro quo for the investor and for the business community.

Deregulation has been alluded to; for example, e-conveyancing, which is covered in the Bill, was mentioned. However, I say to the Paymaster General: there is no point in the Chancellor announcing, as he has done, that he is reducing the number of quangos and civil servants. There can never simply be effective deregulation without changing the very remit of the regulatory authorities, such as the Financial Services Authority, separating them more from Treasury influence and enforcing the principle rather than detailed prescription.

To talk the talk of deregulation, pile on yet more and more red tape and not change the underlying remit of the statutory authorities that are involved in regulation is, of course, to mislead the public about the true intentions of this control-freak Government on so many levels. The sheer cost of dealing with our rules and regulations and our tax system is now a huge burden on our businesses, our national life and our public services.

[Mr. Richard Spring]

We cannot deal with all that in the Bill—it is narrowly based—but we accept it in principle and will not seek to divide the House tonight.

8.40 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (John Healey): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) for the first time from the Dispatch Box and to respond to such a good debate: 20 Back Benchers have spoken, including nine who made their maiden speeches. I am not sure whether the Whips on either side have told those Members who made their maiden speeches that a speech on Second Reading is normally an indication of volunteering for service on the Standing Committee. They say that every Member should serve at some time on a Standing Committee that considers a Finance Bill; they also say that the wise ones do so only once.

I welcome the Conservative Front Benchers' recognition of the important role of anti-avoidance legislation. I welcome their decision not to vote against the Bill. I also welcome their intention rightly to subject its provisions to close scrutiny in Committee. I was interested by the remarks of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) who claimed in his speech and on his website and the Conservative website that the Bill will put at risk investment into Britain. He said that it could harm British business and deter investment.

I must say that I welcome that interest in investment. It is certainly true that, beyond entrenching Britain's long-term economic stability, probably the greatest imperative for our future prosperity is securing the sustained increases in investment, from both public and private sources, that will drive the improvements in productivity that will ensure that this country and our companies retain and improve their competitiveness in future. That is why, compared with 1997, we are now investing £1 billion more in science, £9 billion more in transport and £27 billion more in education and training.

Perhaps we can also look forward to a warmer recognition of the important tax reforms that the Government have put in place to promote private investment: the research and development tax credit; permanent first-year capital allowances; the cut in corporation tax from 33 to 30 per cent. and from 23 to 19 per cent. for small firms; and, of course, the cut in capital gains tax from 40 per cent., where it had been for many years, to 10 per cent. now. We will continue to consider other measures to boost business investment, and to the extent that we can do so with support from the Opposition, so much the better.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman not admit that the real mark of an economy's competence is the amount of foreign investment that a country gains? Under Margaret Thatcher, there was a time when we were gaining 40 per cent. of all inward investment from the European Community. That figure is now down to almost 10 per cent. Is that not a mark of the European Community's confidence in this economy?

John Healey: In recent years this country has done extremely well at attracting direct foreign investment, and we still do. We lead many other European countries on foreign direct investment into the European Community. Business investment has also been rising recently.

I look forward to the detailed debates on the Bill's specific provisions that I will no doubt have with the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, but in keeping with this Second Reading debate, I propose to respond to two of his principal questions now. He raised a concern connected with insurance companies about business transfers and apportionment under clause 42. He said that fundamental changes would be made through secondary rather than primary legislation, and that point was also made by the hon. Members for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) and for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond). The regulation-making power about which the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge is worried will allow continuing consultation on the detail of the new rules with the insurance industry. The industry is actively involved in the process. It wanted more time for consultation and accepted that the way to achieve that would be to implement the provisions in secondary rather than in primary legislation. I think that it also accepts that that is a sensible way of ensuring that we can change provisions of tax legislation if the Financial Services Authority changes the regulatory regime.

The second principal point of concern that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge raised was what he described as retrospection. The Bill contains several provisions that were pre-announced in either the pre-Budget report 2004 or the Budget 2005. It is standard practice to make anti-avoidance provisions effective from the date of their announcement to prevent individuals and companies from taking advantage of the gap between the dates of their announcement and implementation in legislation. He and his colleagues will recognise that that is standard practice because it was done by the previous Government and has continued to be done by this Government.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) acknowledged that macro-economic policy is a sound backdrop to the Bill. I welcome the fact that he brings a strong European perspective to our debates, as does the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet. He and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Susan Kramer) made serious points about self-invested personal pensions and the scope to put property into pension funds. They both promised to give those provisions close scrutiny during the passage of the Bill, and I look forward to that because those measures are not in the Bill—they were legislated for in last year's Finance Bill.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park also raised alternative funding mechanisms, which are well beyond the scope of the Bill. She may know that the Government are considering as part of the package of proposals put forward by the Barker review the possibility of a planning-gain supplement, which might address her point.

I turn to the admirable and entertaining maiden speeches to which the House has been treated. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Jessica Morden) gave us the model of a maiden speech. She, like her predecessor, will clearly be a committed and diligent MP. She set out the challenges that she wants to tackle as a Member of the House and made it clear how much

progress her constituency has made under a Labour Government. I am pleased to say, however, that she will not be making a submission to the boundary commission to propose renaming her constituency "New Newport, East", despite the fact that she has given good service to new Labour in several roles, most recently as a regional director in Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark) made an impressive maiden speech with no speech notes, but lots of passion. She clearly brings a strong political family history and pedigree to the House and I look forward to the strong contribution that she will make to our debates in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Ms McCarthy) treated us to one of a number of humorous maiden speeches made today. As she said, she follows several distinguished predecessors who have represented her constituency, but she brings significant experience of economic and financial matters to the House and, hopefully, to our debates on economic matters, too.

I was pleased to be present when the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) delivered a courteous and kind tribute to his predecessors, including Alan Hurst. The hon. Gentleman treated us to a very interesting and entertaining maiden speech and talked about the history of his constituency and in particular the history of a local market, which dates back to the early 1200s under King John. That reminded me that King John introduced the first national customs service, although I do not know whether he did so with some of the hon. Gentleman's local markets in mind at the time.

The hon. Gentleman made a couple of rather strident political points, as did the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Stuart). Both tried to take the Government to task over our approach to support for pensioners. May I just say that means-testing is necessary for means targeting, and targeting resources on our poorest pensioners through pension credit means that the poorest third of pensioners now receive £32 a week more than they would have done had we simply raised the basic state pension in line with earnings since 1997? The pension credit now pays more than £6 billion a year to our poorest pensioners, guaranteeing them now a minimum income of £109 for a single pensioner and £167 for a pensioner couple.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the Financial Secretary give way?

John Healey: I will, and it is good to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place.

Mr. Davies: That is very kind. Does the Financial Secretary think it right that pensioners in the category that he has just described should be paying an effective marginal tax rate of 40 per cent? What does he think imposing such a marginal tax rate on pensioners with small savings or other incomes does to the incentive to save among people on modest incomes during their working lives?

John Healey: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's point. My argument is about the importance of prioritising the resources we have to help the poorest pensioners. I do not believe the prescription of the Conservative party, of simply increasing the basic state pension by the rate of earnings, is the answer. With over a fifth of pensioners retiring now on more than £400 a week, I do not believe that that would be a justifiable use of the inevitably restricted resources that any Government have at their disposal.

The House will welcome the fact that the wife of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) happily gave birth the other day and I am glad that he was able to deliver his maiden speech, even if it was slightly after the due date. He paid a generous and humorous tribute to Chris Leslie, a local Shipley lad, like the hon. Gentleman, who brought great abilities to this House. Like Opposition Members, I am confident that Chris will be back in this House, whether for Shipley or for somewhere else. However, the current hon. Member for Shipley's speech indicated that he might have some of the same qualities as Chris, and I wish him well.

The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) has worked hard to gain his place in this House and he paid generous tribute to his predecessors and to his constituency, and I pay tribute to his very good maiden speech.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness is not in his place, regrettably, but he spoke with equal passion about his constituency and about Europe. I will alert my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the invitation to Beverley minster, although I say to the hon. Gentleman, "Don't hold your breath."

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) gave a classic maiden speech, although it may have been a touch too bipartisan for his long-term good within the Conservative party. He displayed the historical and literary breadth and background that we know he brings to this House, with references ranging from John Gay to John Betjeman to *Country Life*.

On the contributions by old hands, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) argued in favour of clauses 7 to 10, which rightly bring more flexibility to the provision of pensions. That will increasingly be needed and he is right that the Bill supports the move in that general direction. He also argued that clauses 13 to 15, on scientific research organisations, are important because they will help to support more investment in that part of the British economy. He spoke with knowledge and long experience, both in the House and in his previous role as a trade union official.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) was just warming up when he abruptly sat down. We are pleased to see him back in his seat and hope that his temporary ill health was, indeed, only temporary. He was concerned in particular about the macro-economic position and treated us to his analysis of the fiscal rules. He argued that they are right in principle and right conceptually, but was pessimistic about the Government meeting the golden rule. One or two other hon. Members suggested the same thing.

This year's Budget shows that all tax and spending commitments that we set out are fully funded and that there is a margin of £6 billion against the golden rule in the current cycle. The Budget shows that the golden rule will be met whether the cycle ended last year or ends this

[John Healey]

year or next year. The forecasts are based on cautious assumptions that are independently audited by the National Audit Office. They also build in a safety margin against unexpected events. Alongside Canada, the UK is now the only G7 country with net debt below 40 per cent. of GDP. Public finances in Britain are sound. There is no threat to the sustainability of the UK public finances in the long term.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) was worried about clause 67. The Bill does no more than deal with the tax consequences of the proposed reorganisation of water services in Northern Ireland. The Water Service is due to be transferred to a new company in 2006. That company will remain within the ownership of the Department for Regional Development. The reorganisation is not due to take place until early in 2006, following the extensive consultation that he wants.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Will the Minister assure me that the service will be kept in public ownership and will not get into private hands?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman will have to raise that in the consultation process. The Bill, and my responsibility in relation to clause 67, deals narrowly with the tax consequences of the proposed reorganisation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West (Stephen Hesford) paid tribute to the wide set of policies that are the responsibility of the Chancellor. He described the Treasury as no longer being the dead hand of the Government. It put me in mind of the quote by Harold Wilson, when in contrast he said that the Treasury is full of very clever chaps who are expert at saying no. My hon. Friend was right to say that the principle of fairness underpins the Bill. It does so because we are dealing with those who evade tax and, by doing so, we help to ensure that they do not steal an advantage over their competitors and impose additional tax burdens on those who pay the tax that is due.

Corporate anti-avoidance measures in the Bill are targeted against avoidance. This means that they should have no impact on genuine commercial activity that does not have a UK tax advantage motive. I stress that concern because the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge raised it. The Government are committed to maintaining a modern and competitive tax system, but for that to be effective, everyone must pay a fair share of taxes and the taxes that are legally due.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West asked who the beneficiaries of e-conveyancing will be. First, the taxpayer will be a beneficiary, because the process is simplified immeasurably. The solicitor carrying out the e-conveyancing will be aware of all the requirements and will discover automatically whether there are any errors, so the second beneficiary will be Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, because of the efficiency savings resulting from that type of electronic communication and dealing.

The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) is a former Financial Secretary to the Treasury. I accept that his interest, like mine, is to ensure well-targeted action to counter avoidance, although I am less sure about the group therapy that he seemed to propose for current and ex-Treasury Ministers. He raised important principled concerns about the introduction of what he described as additional discretion for the tax authorities, especially in relation to the arbitrage clauses, 24 to 31. He also described the need for binding tax clearances for the taxpayer.

It might assist the more detailed scrutiny in Committee if I say that the anti-avoidance provisions relating to arbitrage apply only when all the conditions set out in the legislation are met and when HMRC issues a notice. That does not introduce discretion: the conditions of the legislation have to be met and the notice procedure ensures that the legislation is targeted. HMRC has issued guidance and examples of how the legislation will apply in practice. If companies are still unclear about how the provisions apply, they may approach HMRC for clearance, and if clearance is given, HMRC will be bound by it.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Healey: I welcome my hon. Friend to the Chamber for the first time this afternoon, but of course I give way to him.

Mr. Hoyle: Of course tackling tax avoidance is important, but one of the benefits of having local tax offices is local knowledge. Given the good job that they do and the benefits that the community gets from having an accessible local office, will my hon. Friend ensure that the number of local tax offices is not reduced and, in particular, that the office in Chorley will remain open?

John Healey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for HMRC's local activities. He might have missed the finer points of this afternoon's debate, so let me point out that we are dealing with tax avoidance by multinational companies. I am sure that he is not proposing that we locate HMRC local offices in all the places where such information and advice might need to be provided.

Mr. Dorrell: I doubt that any such certificates will be issued by the tax office in Chorley, even assuming that it remains open.

The Financial Secretary has offered an important undertaking to the House. If a taxpayer asks, in advance of making arrangements, whether the Revenue would issue a certificate under [illegible] 24 and 26, the Revenue will give a straight [illegible] the question and that answer will be binding [illegible] Revenue in the event that the taxpayer goes [illegible] with the proposed reorganisation.

John Healey: We are engaged in discussions with companies and their representatives on that very point. HMRC is prepared to give clearances of that nature and is prepared to be bound by them as I have explained.

The hon. Members for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) and for Wimbledon voiced concern about clause 11, which relates to gift aid. The provision is designed to deal with the situation whereby free admission is given by a so-

called donation equivalent to the admission price. The clause therefore upholds the core principles of gift aid in generating new and additional giving and, at the same time, broadens the type of charity to which the gift aid can apply. My officials and I have worked with the sector on the measure and the director of the Museums Association has said:

"To its credit, the Treasury has listened, and is not only modifying its original plan, but also giving museums an extra year to prepare".

The hon. Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) asked whether clause 11 would apply to old books. It will apply if the public are paying to view the books and if it is the charity's objective to look after and/or preserve those books.

The Finance Bill has been introduced with a foundation of fiscal strength and economic stability. Before 1997, Britain simply had not been accustomed to sound public finances or to a strong and stable economy. The challenge now is to lock in our economic success and stability for the future. That means securing the high levels of capital investment, innovation and science, technology, business support and skills that our economy needs for the long term. It means maintaining Britain's position as one of the most open, flexible and competitive countries for business, while still upholding high standards for consumers and employees. That will mean further reform to ensure that the British tax system is competitive, flexible and fair, which is exactly what the measures in the Bill are designed to achieve. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I understand that the committal motion on the Order Paper will not be moved, and that the Government wish to move a different motion. I call Dawn Primarolo.

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I beg to move,

That,

(1) Clauses nos. 11, 18, 40, 43, 44 and 69 and schedule no. 8 shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House;

(2) the remainder of the Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee; and

(3) when the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by the Standing Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill shall be proceeded with as if the Bill had been reported as a whole to the House from the Standing Committee.

This revised motion has been agreed following late requests from the Opposition parties, which I am happy to agree to on behalf of the Government. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

FINANCE BILL

Ordered,

That, during the proceedings on the Finance Bill, the Standing Committee on the Bill shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.—*[Mr. Watts.]*

Road Accidents

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Watts]*

9.8 pm

Ben Chapman (Wirral, South) (Lab): I should like to begin by welcoming the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) to his new position, by congratulating him on his promotion and by welcoming him to his first Adjournment debate in his new capacity. I am delighted to have secured this debate on road traffic accidents and tiredness. I intend to cover three points on signage and its ability to prevent, lessen or cause accidents.

Anyone who has driven on a motorway in recent years will be aware of the presence of the blue signs that warn that "Tiredness Kills". The location of those and their potential effectiveness in enhancing road safety is the first of the issues that I want to raise. The signs seek to tackle the issue of falling asleep at the wheel. Research carried out by Loughborough university has found that 17 per cent. of road crashes that involve road death or injury were sleep-related. That was, in the researchers' opinion, a conservative estimate. That compares with a figure for alcohol-related crashes, for example, of just 3 per cent. The disparity is startling. It might be a measure of the extent of public awareness about drink-driving that, thankfully, now exists.

On the issue of tiredness and driving at the wheel, the Department for Transport has not been idle. According to its website, roughly £1 million a year is spent on publicity warning the public of the dangers of falling asleep at the wheel. There have been press advertisements, one of which I have brought with me. It carries the message:

"You drive for a living but you'd kill for some sleep".

I welcome that stark and effective message, but I have not come across those advertisements nearly as often as I would have liked to have done. There is also a dedicated road safety website, among whose pages a substantial section is devoted to "Tiredness Kills", but much more is necessary.

Driving while under the influence is, in 2005, considered by the vast majority of people to be socially unacceptable, but it has taken many years of public information campaigns from the 1960s to the present day to achieve that. Just this week a new campaign is to be launched that will target the summer months. The budget for it is around £2 million a year. Just half of that sum is to be spent on publicity warning the public of the dangers of driving while tired, although doing so causes many more accidents.

In some ways, of course, one cannot compare the two causes; it is by no means an exact science. One needs to look at the matter carefully to work out the real causes. There is evidence, for example, that undiagnosed medical conditions have their part to play, as do prescription drugs. We cannot suggest that in all cases a driver acted grossly irresponsibly in causing an accident through tiredness as we can for those driving under the influence, but we can credibly claim that there are many cases in which precisely the same culpability is attached. The level of public awareness has not yet caught up with the reality of the situation, and I press the Minister to commit more resources to a campaign in that regard.

[Ben Chapman]

The quibble that I have with the "Tiredness Kills" signs lies with their siting and not their funding. According to the Minister's predecessor, there are 57 signs on motorways in England. To the best of my knowledge, they are without exception sited immediately prior to the entry slip road of motorway service areas. That is good, but of course highly convenient for the commercial operators who maintain and benefit from them. I am not sure that the signs fully optimise their remit. Indeed, as I learned from a written answer, they are sometimes erected purely at the request of operators of the service areas.

However, there are large stretches of motorway throughout the UK that are devoid of places of rest and consequently of signs reminding drivers to take a break. The Loughborough university research found that sleep-related crashes occur least on Fridays and most on Mondays. It should not be beyond the wit of man to assess the location of sleep blackspots and to site warning signs accordingly, using methodology similar to that relating to speed camera locations. In fact, the Loughborough research did precisely that—identifying classes of crashes related to driver tiredness on the A1 in Lincolnshire and elsewhere.

What is surely needed is such a study conducted nationwide. We should not be in the business merely of reacting to the data as they are collated. Such an exercise would of necessity be lengthy, and I would argue that blackspots can be reasonably accurately predicted according to, for example, the type of driver who frequently uses a particular section of road and at what point in the majority of journeys one enters identified periods of increased vulnerability to sleep. There are surely many different criteria by which one might seek to predict the most suitable location for "Tiredness Kills" signs and which would result in their more effective siting than the current approach. Another way of tackling the issue of tiredness is to use the variable message signs that can be programmed to give notice of congestion and so forth more intelligently and extensively to alert drivers to the dangers of tiredness.

The measures contained in the Road Safety Bill recently introduced in another place may include proposals to pilot French-style picnic and rest areas. I welcome that; indeed, I urge the Minister to ensure that the programme is rolled out as quickly as is practicable and to reject the representations of service area operators lobbying against it, albeit for sound business reasons. Such areas are a welcome alternative to the catch-all services areas that currently predominate. In present circumstances, I fear that most drivers will stop only if they have cause to do so for reasons of thirst, hunger or, as it were, the call of nature. An alternative without the shops, restaurants and so forth would encourage a cultural shift in the manner in which long journeys are embarked upon.

I turn to roadside advertising, which is, in many forms, a hazard. Anyone who has recently travelled to or from the north of England using the M6 will not have failed to notice a plethora of advertisements in fields adjoining the carriageway. Some offer used cars for sale, while others might offer to help solve debt problems or to provide fitted kitchens. Some sites are used by well-established multinational corporations and others by what appear to be one-man or one-woman bands. I saw one of particular note between junctions 18 and 19 of the north-bound M6 which advertised escort services, although on closer examination it may have related to ancient Ford vehicles.

However, whatever the repute of the advertisements, the raison d'être of these signs is to draw attention to themselves and to the messages and details that they contain. Some are more effective than others at doing this, but the point is that if they do not distract, they do not work. If using a mobile phone while driving is now illegal, albeit much ignored, trying to get people to take down a telephone or website address by whatever means while driving at speed is no less questionable. I am not suggesting that a competent driver is unable to deal with myriad potential distractions and complex driving situations, but what concerns me, as well as several of my constituents and, I imagine, colleagues in the House and road users up and down the country is the sheer scale and apparently intractable nature of the problem. Companies have been set up specifically to cater for and nurture the demand for such advertisements, one of which boasts on its website:

> "Advertising on motorways is one of the most effective ways to send your message to hundreds of thousands of potential customers . . . it grasps the attention of the bored motorway user; as a consumer he/she fully absorbs and thinks about the message your advert has just delivered."

Frankly, they ought to be thinking about something else—the safety of themselves and other road users.

It seems, although it is not the case, that this is an area that is free of regulation. The fact that that impression is given, however, is enough to suggest that the measures that are in place are not being used as effectively as they might be. Signs of this nature are covered by the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 1992. It would not be helpful or interesting for me to go on an excursion into the minutiae of planning regulations, but it is worth mentioning that two tests are specified by the regulations—public immunity and safety. I contend that the vast majority of advertisements placed in fields adjoining motorways would fail both of them. Certainly, when due process has been followed by prospective advertisers, it seems that there are very few occasions when planning permission has been granted, and even when it has, it is by no means clear that it should have been. A circular from the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions gives the following guidance:

> "Land alongside motorways is landscaped for reasons of safety and appearance . . . It is hoped that local planning authorities will take steps to ensure that on land alongside motorways but not required for them, no advertisements that could adversely affect amenity or constitute a danger to traffic are allowed."

That, you might think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is clear enough, but an apparent loophole exists in the regulations through an exclusion applied to vehicles. Most of the offending advertisements consist of an articulated lorry trailer painted or draped with an advertisement. Those involved might be under the impression that because vehicles are exempt from the regulations they do not apply to them. If there is such an

impression, however, it is mistaken, as it cannot be claimed reasonably that such trailers are, in the words of the conditions,

"normally employed as a moving vehicle"

or that they are

"not used principally for the display of advertisements."

While the middlemen who act as go-betweens for the farmer and advertiser are nothing if not entrepreneurial, the practice has not altogether enjoyed the status of legitimacy. I am pleased, for example, that the Outdoor Advertising Association is at pains to condemn this, and that it is not something with which its members would associate themselves.

It is clear that existing regulations, while they might be technically sufficient to cover the problem, are simply not working effectively. That is the evidence from just a single drive up the M6, for example. Some local authorities are better at tackling the issue than others—Chester city council, for example, has directed resources at and managed to get to grips with the problem. In another case, police motorway patrols have kept a record of the offending advertisements. The intention is for that record to be passed to planning officers. That serves only to underscore the ineffectiveness of the current regime. The issue might concern planners, but surely only on technical grounds. As we have seen, virtually all cases that are heard by local planning committees are turned down on grounds of road safety. The signs are there only by virtue of being next to a trunk road—local authorities will always struggle to police a strip of land that happens to pass through an area under its jurisdiction but is no more integral to the patch than that. I am aware that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister intends to remind local authorities of their duties in this regard later in the year, but that seems to me to be a case of flogging the wrong horse, and possibly of doing so too late.

Furthermore, the problem applies at a more localised level. Some local authorities, including mine in Wirral, have also taken to erecting potentially distracting—in my view—small-scale advertisements with a council header on roundabouts, verges and the like as an extra source of revenue. Anything that saves my council tax I welcome, but I wonder about this. The signs are treated as de minimis, and as individual signs, so they are. Taken together, however, they are a major change to the landscape, and I doubt whether they should be regarded as de minimis. In my view, they do not have a beneficial place in the landscape. I am afraid that, sometimes, they clutter the environment, and after a certain period, they look slightly tatty. As with motorway signs, if they did not distract, advertisers would not use them—they are hard-bitten business people, and they want the bang for their buck.

As an aside, I cannot see that any council would want to take advantage of a scheme, albeit one bringing in revenue, in which the gains did not outweigh the disadvantages. In addition, the appearance of such an advertisement in a frame carrying a council logo might give a spurious impression of council endorsement.

Given that we are dealing primarily with road safety, should not roadside signs be a responsibility of the Highways Agency? Currently, it looks after and has powers to intervene in all such matters, as needed, on all land that constitutes the highway, but is powerless to act on land outside it. The point at which control of the planning process transfers from one local authority to another is purely arbitrary, and advertisers are attracted to motorways as a location precisely because of their arterial nature. In conjunction with the police, the Highways Agency regularly patrols sections of road as part of its everyday duties—in contrast to local authorities, which would have to make special trips, often well away from their headquarters. A good start would be to hold advertisers responsible rather than landowners, the tracing of whom is often vastly time-consuming. While I understand that that is already possible, because this is seen as entirely a planning issue, it rarely happens. What is clear is that a change is needed, both in the extent to which regulations are enforced and in the source from which they emanate.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to look at the issue again, and perhaps to consider amendments to the Road Safety Bill relating to awareness of the dangers of falling asleep and the way in which campaigns are conducted.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentioned the Road Safety Bill. He has not touched on one aspect of this serious subject: older drivers. We are all ageing, and as we age we tend to need more sleep. Some years ago, a GP in my constituency told me that he was horrified at the number of older drivers who continued to drive well after they were no longer capable of being safe behind a wheel. Does my hon. Friend think that that too needs attention? The Road Safety Bill makes some attempt to consider it, but it needs much more attention and also research. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Ben Chapman: I think I do, although I do so reluctantly, as a driver who has reached a certain age and deludes himself that he still carries the torch of youth. I am sure that it is possible to demonstrate statistically that older drivers are more vulnerable to road incidents, and I agree that the Road Safety Bill should pay more attention to that.

We need to look at the issue of "Tiredness Kills" signs, to seek effective control of what are said to be temporary motorway signs, and to consider the advisability of local authority-encouraged roadside advertising.

9.27 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Dr. Stephen Ladyman): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Ben Chapman) for welcoming me to my new portfolio; I look forward to it greatly. He will have seen in the weekend newspapers a prediction of one of the more exciting debates in which we will be involved over the next year or so, to which I also look forward. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) pointed out, the Road Safety Bill will be before us in the not-too-distant future, and we shall be able to debate in detail many of the issues that we have discussed this evening.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I know that he has been interested in this subject for a long time, and I expect to debate it with him on numerous future occasions. We have a good road safety record in this country. In fact, it is among the best in the

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

world. The number of deaths and serious injuries continues to fall, but every road death is one too many, so the Government have set a tough target to drive it down further. We have committed ourselves to reducing the number of casualties by 40 per cent. by 2010.

As my hon. Friend said, road traffic accidents caused by drivers falling asleep at the wheel are a serious problem. Our research suggests that as many as 10 per cent. of accidents on our road network are sleep-related in one way or another, and as many as 20 per cent. of accidents on motorways and similar roads occur as a result of driver sleepiness. Many are single-vehicle accidents, but they can have particularly tragic consequences. We have estimated that more than 300 fatalities a year occur because drivers have fallen asleep at the wheel.

Being new to this portfolio, I, like any new Minister, began with many intensive briefings, and I was staggered to discover how high our estimate is of the number of fatalities resulting from sleepiness. It is difficult to tell, however, whether the number of accidents resulting from driver sleepiness is rising. However, as we increasingly become a 24/7 society, more people are driving at night, when the risks are higher.

In recent years, we have acquired considerable knowledge on the subject of driver sleepiness through our road safety research programme. This has established that sleep-related crashes typically involve vehicles running off the road or into the back of another vehicle, and are worsened by the high speed of impact because the sleeping driver takes no avoiding action. Sleep-related crashes are therefore more likely to result in serious injury than the average road accident. Many of the accidents are also work-related, in so far as they involve trucks, goods vehicles and company car drivers. That is one reason why the advertising campaign and poster referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South is targeted at people who drive for a living.

The body's natural biological clock has a major influence on sleepiness. Such accidents peak in the early hours of the morning—between 2 am and 6 am—and again between 2 o'clock and 4 o'clock in the afternoon. These are times when we are naturally sleepier, due to our circadian rhythms. Sleep-related crashes are more evident among young male drivers in the early morning and among older male drivers during the mid-afternoon, as the post-lunch "dip" tends to become more apparent as we get older. Young men are, of course, more likely to be on the road during the small hours, but the effects of sleep loss and sleepiness are more profound in younger, rather than older, people. Young men are also more likely to ignore the signs of sleepiness, so they are at much greater risk of being involved in a sleep-related crash.

Our research has also looked at how drivers fall asleep at the wheel. We know that sleep does not usually occur suddenly and without warning. Signs of sleepiness such as yawning are the first indication, and drivers will reach the stage of consciously trying to stay awake by taking action such as opening the window or turning up the radio before they start to close their eyes for prolonged periods. Drivers should be aware of these signs, but many fail to appreciate that their driving is impaired and just how quickly they can fall asleep.

Unfortunately, sleepiness can also cause mild euphoria and increased confidence in one's driving ability. However, continuing to drive while sleepy and relying on cold air or noise to stay awake has been shown to have limited benefits—sufficient only to enable a driver to find somewhere safe to stop and take a break. Taking a short walk has also been found to have little benefit. Nor do we recommend using sleep detection devices, as drivers may be encouraged to rely on them in order to stop falling asleep, when in fact they should not be driving because they are tired. A driver should stop well before such a device is activated.

As soon as drivers start to feel sleepy, they should stop somewhere safe—not on the hard shoulder of a motorway—and have a couple of cups of coffee or other caffeinated drink. As the caffeine takes about 20 minutes to be absorbed, drivers should take this time to have a short rest. A nap of about 15 minutes, or even just relaxing and closing one's eyes while the caffeine kicks in, is effective in combating sleepiness. Across the motorway network, service areas should be available every 30 miles or so, giving drivers a chance to stop regularly. Most other roads offer a variety of opportunities for drivers to take a break.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South referred to the "Tiredness kills: take a break" signs. They are currently sited on the approaches to some motorway service areas, particularly in places where there are few other opportunities to stop. As he said, they are generally located in advance of the signs for the service areas, where drivers can stop in a secure place. As he also said, there are currently 57 such signs on motorways in England. Decisions about the provision of such signs on trunk roads and the motorway network are a matter for the Highways Agency. I will consider my hon. Friend's suggestion that there should be more of them and that they should be located differently. As I said, I am new to the portfolio and still learning what might and might not be effective. I am prepared to look at sensible suggestions such as the one that he has made. I certainly undertake to consider with the Highways Agency whether we should have more of those signs and where they should be located.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud mentioned in an intervention, the Road Safety Bill is about to be considered by the House again. It was introduced in the House of Lords on 24 May, and it will allow the Secretary of State to establish motorway rest areas to help to combat fatigue. Those rest areas will be similar in style to French "aires" and will provide an alternative to traditional motorway service areas. The plan is for an initial trial to evaluate the potential to encourage drivers on long journeys to stop to take a break, rather than to press on to their destination.

We have to ask how we can change driver behaviour. For a number of years, the Department—my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South referred to this—has run publicity campaigns to highlight the dangers of falling asleep at the wheel. However, to ensure that we had a good understanding of how the driver tiredness messages should be developed, towards the end of last

year, the Department commissioned some qualitative research and found that drivers believed a good journey was one that could be made without stopping.

For many, the solution when starting to feel sleepy was to wind down the window and turn up the radio. Refuelling the car or stopping to buy food or to go to the toilet was seen as taking a break. Some male drivers felt that the advice to take a nap was unrealistic. We therefore decided to develop new messages as part of an integrated campaign that featured new radio advertisements, new publicity materials such as posters and leaflets, and partnership advertising. The new campaign was launched this Easter. It targeted young male drivers, who are more likely to fall asleep at the wheel; leisure drivers, who may drive further distances at holiday times than they are used to; and those driving for work, in view of the high number of fatigue-related crashes involving someone who was at work at the time.

For the male 18 to 30 age group, the radio advertisement sets out the reality of a crash when a sleeping driver has failed to brake. It was run between midnight and 6 am as that is the high-risk period. The fact that my hon. Friend has not heard the advert too frequently probably indicates that, usually, he is not driving between midnight and 6 am and that he is not listening to the same radio stations as 18 to 30-year-olds. The advertisement aimed at leisure drivers highlights how the monotony of motorway driving can send them to sleep and reminds them to take a break. We are also continuing to run the micro-sleep meeting advert targeting at-work drivers during the afternoon, when the body clock is in a natural trough.

We spent more than £350,000 on the Easter campaign and I am pleased to report that we found that 51 per cent. of all drivers understood the main message to take a break while driving. That is up from the Easter campaign two years ago, when 19 per cent. of drivers recognised the message. We have earmarked some £600,000 for the driver tiredness campaign during 2005–06.

My hon. Friend agreed that we had dedicated resources to that message. He asked us to look at dedicating more resources to see how effective it was. I assure him that we will look to see how effective the campaign is. If necessary, we will look again at how resources are targeted.

Mr. Drew: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. Besides being an excellent Minister, he was an eminent scientist in a previous incarnation. Perhaps in advance of the Road Safety Bill, it would be useful to commission research into the impact of age on sleep patterns. We have an ageing population with many more older drivers. The research could examine whether that is resulting in a greater number of crashes. I hope that he will consider that. It is not a minor matter—it is of growing importance.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. I understand the point that he makes and I undertake to look at the matter and to discuss it with officials to see what research is available. No doubt we will discuss it as the Road Safety Bill passes through the House. If a sensible amendment could be made to the Bill, I would be happy to give it careful consideration.

We shall have to take account of checks and balances. Where young men tend to overestimate their driving ability and resilience, older drivers perhaps—I emphasise perhaps—may be better judges of their tiredness, more willing to take breaks, better able to pace themselves and understand the risks of sleepiness and less willing to take those risks. Older drivers may be more prone to falling asleep, but they could be more likely to make good judgments in dealing with the problem. We shall have to debate both those issues further and determine how to deal with them more effectively.

Mr. Drew: I entirely agree and I am not in any way traducing the great elderly population of this country, but I still urge the Minister to reflect further on whether older drivers who have a serious problem as a result of age and infirmity should be allowed to drive at all. I hope that that consideration will be examined carefully and taken into account.

Dr. Ladyman: I agree with my hon. Friend that if an older driver has developed a condition that makes him or her prone to fall asleep and become dangerous at the wheel, it should be a matter of careful consideration as to whether they should continue to be allowed to hold a licence. I shall look further into our arrangements for checking up on that matter and ensure that people's medical conditions are properly assessed and reported to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. I am happy to give my hon. Friend the assurance that we will look further into the problem that he identifies. As I have said, if sensible amendments could be suggested to the Road Safety Bill that would be practical in effect, I would be happy to examine them.

To conclude my remarks about the campaign that we launched, it was also promoted by partnership marketing activity where interested parties reinforced the driver tiredness messages. For example, Multimap encoded the "Take a break" message into their route planner, so drivers were reminded that after two hours of driving it was time to take a break. Road Chef and Little Chef offered coffee promotions. The Royal Automobile Club, *What Car?* magazine and the M6 toll road all distributed publicity materials for us and free truck-back advertising has also been negotiated with Wincanton to include driver tiredness messages.

Although we rely on educating drivers about the dangers of sleepiness, it is important to remember that the police can take action and prosecute irresponsible drivers who fail to take action when they start to feel sleepy. The courts also take the issue seriously, as falling asleep at the wheel is treated as an aggravating rather than a mitigating factor when considering sentencing.

Our publicity messages are, of course, aimed at all drivers, but it is important not to overlook those who are driving for work. We estimate that about 40 per cent. of sleep-related crashes are probably work-related, as they involve commercial vehicles such as large goods vehicles and vans. Employers should also ensure that employees who have to drive as part of their job have the opportunity to take breaks and know that they can stop if they start to feel sleepy.

Professional drivers are governed by additional rules. European regulations require the use of tachographs and set maximum limits on driving time and minimum

[Dr. Ladyman]

requirements for breaks and rest periods for most HGV drivers and about half the bus and coach drivers in the UK. Separate UK domestic rules govern those operations that are exempt from the EU drivers' hours rules.

There is also separate legislation on working time. Generally speaking, the Road Transport (Working Time) Regulations 2005 apply to drivers and crew participating in road transport activities that fall within the scope of European drivers' hours rules, whereas the main Working Time Regulations 1998, as amended, apply to those drivers operating under domestic rules.

A further measure in the Road Safety Bill should help enforcement of the rules. New powers are being sought to enable both the police and the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency examiners to issue fixed penalty notices for drivers' hours offences. The penalties will be graduated according to the severity of the offence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South also expressed concern about the potential distraction caused by advertisements next to motorways. Although there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that advertising alongside motorways can have a detrimental effect on road safety, the results of studies carried out to date have been inconclusive.The Highways Agency is concerned that, as unauthorised signs proliferate, there may be an increased impact on road safety, as well as obvious detriment to the environment alongside the road. However, it has no general powers to remove advertisements on private land.

Advertisements displayed in fields next to motorways should have the approval of the relevant local planning authority, but many are erected without the appropriate consent. Local planning authorities have powers under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to require any unlawfully displayed advertisements to be removed. The Highways Agency will write to the relevant local planning authority to bring the presence of the advertisements to the planning authorities' attention. I will undertake to discuss this matter again with the Highways Agency, and make sure that its officials are diligent in bringing advertisements to the attention of local planning authorities. If it appears that that is ineffective, I shall discuss the matter with ministerial colleagues to see whether other powers can be deployed or whether future legislation should be modified to include provisions to deal with this problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South may be aware, although the display of advertisements is not normally permitted within the highway boundary, operators of motorway service areas are allowed to display their company name on a header board fixed to service area advance warning signs. Only the name of the operator may appear, rather than merely the name of a company trading at the service area.

My hon. Friend has raised some important issues in this debate. I repeat that, as I am new to my portfolio, I do not claim to have all the answers yet. He has offered some sensible ideas and made constructive suggestions for how we should proceed, and I shall make sure that my officials study them with care. We will adopt those proposals that the evidence shows will lead to an improvement in the road safety statistics.

I emphasise, however, that in the end it is the responsibility of drivers to ensure that they do not ignore the signs of sleepiness. I shall take the opportunity provided by this debate to put on the record my plea that drivers make an effort to plan journeys so that they can stop every two hours. They should not ignore the signs of sleepiness—their lives depend on it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twelve minutes to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 June 2005

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

The Deputy Prime Minister was asked—

Housing

1. **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford) (Con): If he will make a statement on the house-building programme in the Chelmsford local authority area. [1963]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Yvette Cooper): The Essex and Southend structure plan includes an annual building rate of 777 homes in Chelmsford borough. The future building rate for the area will be determined through the current review of the regional spatial strategy for the east of England.

Mr. Burns: The Minister knows that those figures add up to 14,000 houses over 10 years being inflicted on the Chelmsford local authority area. One of the concerns of many people is the lack of infrastructure to support those new communities. Has the Minister had time to study the Tym report, which suggests that there is a £6 billion black hole in funding the infrastructure? Will she tell me and my constituents how and where the money will be found?

Yvette Cooper: We do believe that infrastructure is important. That is why we are already putting £700 million for local and regional transport into the region over the next three years. The hon. Gentleman has consistently opposed the proposed new homes in his area, regardless of the infrastructure. He knows that the average house price in Chelmsford now is more than £200,000 whereas the average household income is just over £30,000. He can do the maths as well as the rest of us: if he wants to help first-time buyers, he needs to support proposals for the extra homes that we need throughout the region.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) illustrates the importance of decisions about new housing developments being made by local councils, not central Government. What will the Minister do to assess accurately the number of hidden homeless people who are not registered anywhere and therefore not included in homelessness statistics? Crisis estimates that the number of single people in bed and breakfast accommodation or hostels, squatters, people sleeping on friends' floors—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt, but the hon. Lady is bound by the rules of the House. The question is about the Chelmsford local authority.

Local Government

2. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What recent representations he has received on local government finance. [1964]

3. **Anne Milton** (Guildford) (Con): If he will make a statement on council tax revaluation. [1965]

4. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): If he will make a statement on the review of local government funding. [1966]

The Minister of Communities and Local Government (Mr. David Miliband): We look forward to the report of the independent inquiry by Sir Michael Lyons, which is due to be submitted to my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor by the end of the year. In the meantime, we continue to receive many representations on a variety of local government finance issues.

Stephen Hammond: Council tax in Wimbledon has risen by 75 per cent. since 1997 and I have received several representations from constituents about the proposed council tax revaluation. Will the Minister confirm to my constituents and the House that the revaluation will not result in another large increase in council tax but will be fiscally neutral?

Mr. Miliband: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the proceedings. I would have thought that his constituents would tell him about the increase of nearly £50 million to the London borough of Merton under this Government. I am happy to confirm that we propose a revenue-neutral revaluation. That has been made clear from the beginning.

Anne Milton: Will the Minister guarantee that the average council tax bill will remain the same for my residents in Guildford, or will he come clean and admit that the revaluation is simply another opportunity to impose a stealth tax on hard-working families and pensioners?

Mr. Miliband: The increase in grant to the hon. Lady's council last year was greater than at any time since the 1990s. I would have thought that Conservative Members would congratulate the Government on those increased grants and contrast them with the cuts under their party. As she knows, the revaluation is being done on a revenue-neutral basis. Last year, the grant increase more than made up for the increase in costs that was being imposed.

Mr. Heath: When I first raised the issue, local Conservatives told me that it was all nonsense. However, that was before they discovered it during the general election campaign.

Experience in Wales suggests that revaluation will hit hardest where average income is low and house prices are high, as in the west country; where house prices have rapidly increased, as in the west country; and where it will be felt most keenly by local authorities that do not get a fair deal from the current system, as in the west country. Is not the only answer to get rid of an unfair tax and replace it with something that is related to ability to pay?

Mr. Miliband: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that we are not conducting revaluation on the same basis as in Wales. An interesting newspaper—the South Staffordshire *Rose*, which is published by an august local organisation, namely, the local Labour party—cites the president of the Liberal Democrats on local income tax. He says:

"I don't think actually in the end it worked well."

We agree with that.

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan) (Lab): Whatever the end result of the review, can my right hon. Friend assure the House that it will not change the system that ensures that the amount of money that goes to local government is based on need? Deprived areas should not have their money taken away, as it was under the Conservative Government, and put into places such as Westminster.

Mr. Miliband: My hon. Friend has campaigned on these issues for a long time. He is right to say that the new local government funding formula recognises need, which was not the case in the 1980s and 1990s. I am proud of those changes. I assure him that the Labour Government will not reverse them.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that the proportion of revenue raised for local services from the business rate reduced in real terms by 5 per cent. in the 10 years from 1993–94? Over the same period, there has been a real-terms increase in council tax for local residents of 37.5 per cent. Does he not agree that it is about time that ordinary domestic council tax payers were given the same protection from excessive council tax rises as is available to the business rate payer?

Mr. Miliband: I met Sir Michael Lyons last week, and I understand that he has received over 400 representations. I hope that my hon. Friend will make a representation to him, too. That is certainly one of the issues that Sir Michael is able to consider.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Will the Minister consider ways in which he could better educate Members of the House in the complexities of local government finance, so that they understand that revaluation does not necessarily mean that bills will go up, and that it is the responsibility of local councils to decide the level of council tax and how to spend that money on local services?

Mr. Miliband: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's offer. I am trying to educate myself in the complexities of local government finance, so I should not start giving too many lessons to the rest of the House. Any hon. Member is welcome to join me on that voyage of discovery, because it is certainly well worth it.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I presume that, during his voyage of discovery, the Minister has reflected on the fact that the revaluation will have a dramatic effect on the ability-to-pay estimate that the present system of distribution uses. The effect could be that London and the south-east lost grant again and that grant went to northern, urban, probably Labour areas. Is he contemplating providing compensation for that?

Mr. Miliband: I can do no better than to quote the leader of the hon. Gentleman's own party, who said in February, "You have to revalue." Conservative Members have to think about that and get some consistency into their own position.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government have a genuinely open mind about the significant reforms that may be recommended by the Lyons review, including the transfer of business rate back to local authorities to deal with the gearing problem, the expansion of the bands at the top and bottom end of council tax to make it more progressive, and reform of the council tax benefit system to deal with the deplorably low take-up, particularly among poorer owner-occupiers?

Mr. Miliband: We set up the Lyons inquiry with an open remit, and we have appointed someone of the authority of Sir Michael Lyons to look into those issues. We insist that his inquiry be his own. He has a wide-ranging remit and total freedom to recommend what he likes.

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): Is the Minister looking forward to the results of the revaluation exercise in England? I wonder what he is lobbying for first—fair local income tax or a reshuffle?

Mr. Miliband: I am glad that the hon. Lady has extended the usual courtesies to new Front Benchers and has started off in the manner in which she intends to carry on. I am certainly not looking forward to the next reshuffle, as one is as likely to go out as to go up. It is always important to remember that we are not looking to implement local income tax, which would not be a sensible way forward; but I look forward to debating these issues with her in an open and frank way.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Minister confirm whether any of the submissions received on local government finance have been from the F40 group of the worst funded local education authorities—Leicestershire county council is 150th out of 150? Despite a large growth in education funding over the past eight years, there is still a broad gap to be bridged. Will he confirm that the F40 submission will be given very careful consideration?

Mr. Miliband: I will be very surprised if the F40 group has not made a submission to the Lyons inquiry. As far as I am aware, it has not made any submission to me, but

I would be happy to check. It is important to say—I have debated this matter long and hard with my hon. Friend—that the increases in funding for Leicestershire in schools and elsewhere have been significant over the last eight years. However much my hon. Friend argues that his area would like to be higher up the league table, the fact remains that Leicestershire pupils and residents are doing far better than they were eight years ago. It is important to remember that.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Minister was quick to read out a piece of Labour party propaganda from South Staffordshire, but I wonder whether he has had time to read his own Government's White Paper on the question of revaluation in England and Wales? It states that

"there should not be any change in the amount of council tax collected",

yet in Wales the amount of tax taken went up by 10 per cent. in the first year. Does that not prove that the forthcoming revaluation in England is nothing more than a Trojan horse for this Government's third-term tax rises?

Mr. Miliband: The document was not about Wales, so that is not surprising. We are talking about a revenue-neutral revaluation in England. I remind the hon. Lady that, just a couple of months ago, she said in the House that

"a property-based tax must take account of changes in the value of the property".—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2005; Vol. 431, c. 983.]

She cannot run away from what she said before the House.

Mrs. Spelman: Council tax payers have already suffered a 76 per cent. increase since 1997 and nothing that the Minister has said will allay fears of a further increase from revaluation. To add insult to injury, it was reported at the weekend that the Government ID card scheme will land local authorities with £10 billion worth of costs. Will the Minister give an assurance that people will be spared the £100 surcharge on their council tax bills for ID cards, which many people neither can afford nor want?

Mr. Miliband: We know what would drive up council tax—a £2 billion cut in local authority grant that was proposed by the Conservative party.

Hon. Members: Answer!

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot hear the Minister, but is he referring to Conservative party policy?

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend consider the particular unfairness of council tax revaluation on council tenants? Self-evidently, they do not benefit from an open-market revaluation of their property. During the last general election campaign, I spoke to council tenants in Wrexham who, unfortunately, because of the revaluation in Wales, faced increasing council tax in excess of 20 per cent. How would my right hon. Friend have justified that increase to my constituents on the doorstep?

Mr. Miliband: One of the benefits of devolution is that I do not have to defend those decisions, which are taken by elected Members in Wales. What would be catastrophic for my hon. Friend's constituents, however, is the freezing of local government grant for two years, which some parties in the House have proposed. That would mean an 11 per cent. increase in council tax across the country. I certainly promise my hon. Friend that we shall not do that.

Housing

5. **Mr. Alan Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): What plans he has for affordable housing in rural areas. [1967]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Jim Fitzpatrick): We have already put in place policies to protect supply and achieve a higher proportion of affordable homes in rural areas, partly through the planning system, but mainly because we have doubled overall funding for affordable homes since 1997 and supported the creation of 230,000 new homes.

Mr. Beith: Assuming that the Government recognise, as I take to be the implication of the Minister's reply, that young families on low rural wages are completely priced out of the market for very expensive housing in rural areas, how does he believe that the arbitrary restriction, proposed by the unelected regional assembly, to about 70 houses a year for each of the Berwick and Alnwick areas will allow for the building of small groups of affordable homes in rural communities?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The right hon. Gentleman obviously raises a concern about Berwick, but I hope that he accepts that investment in affordable housing there has risen to £2 million per year since 2003 and that resources are finite. As he suggests, the North East Housing Board is now looking into how to allocate its resources for the period from 2006 to 2008. Berwick has the opportunity to submit an application that I am sure will be looked at carefully.

Ms Angela C. Smith (Sheffield, Hillsborough) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, while it is important to provide affordable housing in rural areas, it is equally important to ensure that that housing is decent and of high quality?

Jim Fitzpatrick: Since 1997, the Government have doubled the funding for affordable housing and, as I mentioned, supported the creation of 230,000 new homes. Overall, the capital spending allocation for housing between 1993 and 1997 was halved, whereas we have tripled it to £5 billion. We recently published the document "HomeBuy: Expanding the Opportunity to Own", which is targeted at the lower end of the market. I commend that document to the House.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): The question of affordable housing has been a massive issue in Wales over the past 10 years. Will the Minister say what consequential payments from the funds to which he has referred were made to Wales?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am sorry, but I cannot answer that question at the Dispatch Box today. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman, but I remind him that many of these matters have been devolved to Wales.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Just before the general election, I met a woman in Etwall in my constituency who told me that her daughter works in the NHS and has found it impossible to get on the first rung of the housing ladder. What can my hon. Friend do to facilitate shared ownership in rural areas so that people can remain in their communities and serve them by working in the public service?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The starter home initiative has already provided more than 10,000 homes for first-time buyers. The key worker housing budget is £725 million, and regional housing boards are considering the problem that he has highlighted. In due course, we hope to be able to help 110,000 key workers with accommodation.

6. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): If he will make a statement on affordable homes in north Yorkshire. [1968]

The Minister for Local Government (Mr. Phil Woolas): The Government have allocated funding of £30.5 million for the provision of affordable housing in North Yorkshire through the Housing Corporation's approved development programme in 2004–05 and 2005–06 to provide more than 740 affordable homes.

Miss McIntosh: I thank the Minister for that answer, and take this opportunity to congratulate him on his new appointment. Does he accept that the shortage of affordable homes in north Yorkshire has reached acute levels? Nationally, there are 400,000 first-time house buyers in any one year. However, the shared equity scheme will help only 100,000 such people over five years. How can he say that the provisions go far enough in areas such as mine?

Mr. Woolas: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks. I can reassure her that, in preparation for this Question Time, the pressures on her constituency were brought fully to my attention. Those pressures are a serious problem in her part of Yorkshire. In addition to the money being made available, consultation is being held throughout the region about what should happen in the region in future. Moreover, I remind her that other affordable homes are being made available by the market under the provisions of section 106 of the Planning and Compensation Act 1991. However, we acknowledge the pressures in her part of the world—which, I may say, is a particularly beautiful one.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that, in my constituency, we suffer from many of the same problems that affect more northern areas of the county? Ilkley is in a very beautiful part of my constituency, but the economic boom in Leeds and the excellent train service along the Wharf valley mean that there is a grave shortage of affordable homes for first-time buyers. Would he agree also—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister has enough to deal with.

Mr. Woolas: I can confirm that the Ilkley area is also a beautiful part of Yorkshire. The problems to which my hon. Friend refers are due to the success of the Government's economic and transport policies. However, I assure her that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and my Front-Bench colleagues are fully aware of the pressures that she has described. That is why we have adopted our policies in respect of affordable homes and first-time buyers.

Pathfinders

7. **Mr. Robert Flello** (Stoke-on-Trent, South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the operation of pathfinders. [1969]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. John Prescott): The housing market renewal pathfinders are investing £1.2 billion to create sustainable communities in parts of the north and midlands. My hon. Friend's constituency is already benefiting from £30 million for the north Staffordshire pathfinder up to March next year. Work is under way in the Coalville and Meir estates. Like the other pathfinders, north Staffordshire "Renew" is helping to deliver stronger neighbourhoods and a better mix of housing which people will want to rent or buy.

Mr. Flello: May I seek further reassurance for my constituents that local residents will be at the heart of the plan and their views will be more than taken into consideration all the way through the process?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. Indeed, the survey done on the original programmes showed that 80 per cent. of the people participating in the programme very much agreed with it.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): How will the £1.2 billion being spent in the north and midlands be taken into account in terms of Government grant to the rest of the country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The £1.2 billion programme is from Government financing, but all the pathfinder programmes are a combination of public and private financing. The programmes cover some 34,000 homes, 21,000 of which will be refurbished and 10,000 demolished. That is nowhere near the stupid figure quoted in the press, of 400,000 being demolished.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): I welcome the fact-finding mission that officials from his office are making to Burslem as we speak. Will my right hon. Friend arrange a follow-up meeting with north Staffordshire MPs, so that we can ensure that all aspects

of Government policy are joined up to action on the ground in the north Staffordshire pathfinder housing "Renew"?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I certainly can give my hon. Friend that assurance and I look forward to that meeting. I also welcome the fact that her area has a newly elected Labour mayor.

Culture of Respect

8. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to foster a culture of respect. [1970]

The Minister for Local Government (Mr. Phil Woolas): The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible for the creating sustainable communities policy—communities that are thriving, well run, active, inclusive and, importantly, safe. We are working hard to develop that culture of respect to which the question refers.

Mr. Robathan: The Government have placed fostering a culture of respect at the centre of their legislative programme in the Queen's Speech. Does the Minister agree that leadership by example is important? If so, does he think that the Deputy Prime Minister thumping people in the street and swearing at and insulting people in the Corridors of this House helps in fostering the culture of respect that we all wish to see in this country?

Mr. Woolas: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has just contributed to an increase in respect for Members of Parliament, and his party in particular. I thought it very unfortunate that the young thug attacked my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who is of course of pensionable age, and I would have thought that such thuggish behaviour would be condemned by the hon. Gentleman. The Government are working hard to foster the culture of respect across our society, and that is necessary because it was decimated in the previous 20 years.

Regional Fire Control

10. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What the timetable is for the establishment of regional fire control rooms. [1972]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Jim Fitzpatrick): The FireControl project is due to complete its rollout by end of the financial year 2008–09. Any updates will be posted on the FireControl website (http://www.firecontrol.odpm.gov.uk).

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that response, but there are concerns in Shrewsbury about power and authority being moved away from our area to regional areas and Birmingham. What assurances can he give to professionals in the fire service in Shrewsbury that their professional advice will be taken on board when decisions are made in the future?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a well rehearsed point. However, the fact is that most highly skilled control staff are under-used. In Shropshire, for example, they average nearly two hours between answering emergency calls and are employed on other tasks. The second point that I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear in mind is that the best communications for our fire and rescue service are needed, including caller location systems and data transmission to fire crews. The Government are committed to providing that. Finally, in the post-September 11 world our emergency control centres need to be resilient against attack or natural disaster; many simply are not. We will have to do something about that and I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that there will be full consultation and that an announcement will be made soon.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [1878] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): Before I list my engagements I know that the whole House will want to join me in conveying the condolences of the House on the death of the hon. Member for Cheadle, Patsy Calton. Our thoughts and prayers are with her and her family at this time.

I know that the whole House will also join me in sending our condolences to the family of Lance Corporal Brackenbury who was killed on duty in Iraq since the House rose on 27 May. He was doing an extraordinary and heroic job and the country can be very proud of him.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others in addition to my duties in the House. I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Burns: I thank the Prime Minister. As someone who served on the Select Committee on Health with the late hon. Member for Cheadle, may I say how much I agree and share his sentiments?

Will the Prime Minister tell us if the UK rebate is negotiable?

The Prime Minister: The UK rebate will remain and we will not negotiate it away. Period.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): My right hon. Friend may recall that on 9 March I raised with him in this place the issue of airgun safety. Since that occasion, we have seen the tragic death of yet another youngster, 12-year-old Alex Cole from Conisbrough in Doncaster near my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time to carry out a thorough review of the legislation relating to airguns and replica guns?

The Prime Minister: I agree entirely about the problem to which my hon. Friend draws attention. It is partly for that reason that the violent crime Bill that will be published later today will include specific measures on the misuse of airguns. It will also tackle the problems of knives and alcohol-related disorder, ensuring that we can take a series of measures to deal not just with airguns but with the whole range of issues that cause concern in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere. We will keep the law on replica guns and airguns closely and tightly under review.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in the condolences that he has expressed to the family of the late hon. Member for Cheadle, Patsy Calton.

On the day when the United Nations reports that 3 million children in Africa will die of poverty by 2015 may I congratulate the Prime Minister on his success in persuading President Bush to agree to a programme of debt relief for Africa's poorest countries? As the Prime Minister knows, we stand four-square behind him on that, as we do on aid spending targets and the international finance facility. But does he agree that the best way to help developing countries would be to get rid of the barriers that both the United States and the European Union place in the way of their trading opportunities? Did he raise that issue with the President and if so what progress did he make?

The Prime Minister: Of course that was one of the issues we raised in the course of our discussions. I think it is important to emphasise that at Gleneagles we shall be trying to raise the whole range of issues that affect Africa. We are trying to put together a comprehensive plan that deals with aid, debt, trade, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, conflict resolution and the main killer diseases, but also governance and action against corruption. It is a comprehensive package; trade is a very important part of it and I hope that at the G8 summit we can make progress on that issue as well, to make sure that when we come to the World Trade Organisation negotiations later this year, which will try to set the trade rules for coming years, we have a bold and radical package that will help Africa and other parts of the world.

Mr. Howard: I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister did raise these issues with the President. Can he tell us whether he specifically raised the issue of US cotton subsidies, which have such a harmful effect on the economies of west and central Africa, including Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin and Chad? Did he raise the US Farm Act, which provides such an unfair advantage to American farmers at the expense of the developing world? Can he update the House on progress in tackling European Union export subsidies for agricultural goods sold to Africa? Do these, too, not help to impoverish developing countries, as well as wasting European taxpayers' money?

The Prime Minister: Certainly, as part of the discussions with the Administration we raise all those issues, to do with not just American subsidies for agriculture but also European subsidies. The hope that I have is that we can at least agree certain principles. Obviously, this has to be negotiated in the World Trade Organisation—that is the proper place for the negotiation—but I hope that at the G8 summit we are able at the very least to negotiate certain principles that give a clear sense of direction to the people who will then take on the negotiation at the G8.

I think that there is every indication from the European side that they are prepared to take a more radical look at how we ensure that there is better access into our markets for the poorest countries in the world. It is worth pointing out that already, as a result of action taken by the European Union, we have allowed certain goods into our markets without tariffs being set. We have to take that further now.

The only thing I would emphasise to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, however, is that, in my judgment, none of these issues has to be looked at in isolation. We could remove all the trade barriers to goods coming from those poorest countries into the wealthy countries' markets, but unless we build the capacity in those countries—the infrastructure—to enable them to handle that, it would not actually do them much good. So it is the package of measures together that will count.

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab): May I wish the Prime Minister well in his attempts to make climate change the centrepiece of the G8 discussions? Will he take the opportunity to remind the leaders who fly in there that, despite all the laudable gains that are being made by countries in terms of reducing carbon emissions, the one Achilles' heel that we share is that they are being overwhelmed by the growth in carbon emissions from aviation fuel? Will he take the opportunity to say that we have to set global targets and global caps on aviation fuel growth, which will wipe out all the other gains that we would hopefully achieve?

The Prime Minister: First, may I thank my hon. Friend for his good wishes? Thus fortified, I will take on the negotiations. In respect of climate change, he is right to say that aviation is an important part of any overall deal, and I hope that at the G8 summit it is possible to put together a plan of action for change that includes not merely issues to do with some of the more traditional things, such as motor vehicles, but also in respect of aviation. It will obviously be a hard challenge, for reasons that my hon. Friend understands, but I think that it is important that we make progress on it.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD): May I thank both the Prime Minister and the leader of the Conservative party for their tributes to our late colleague, Patsy Calton? Those of us who were in the Chamber when, just two weeks ago, she made the journey to Westminster to take the oath could not have been left in any doubt as to her courage and determination, and I am grateful for what the Prime Minister had to say.

Given the statement from the leading scientific bodies of the G8 countries—including, it should be said, the United States—about the fact that climate change is real and now demands prompt action, will the Prime

Minister spell out to us, what prompt action the President of the United States agreed to during his discussions with him yesterday?

The Prime Minister: We have begun a discussion which—as I said a moment ago—we hope will result in a plan for action at the G8 summit. Certain things are obvious. The United States Administration are not going to change their position suddenly, and sign up to Kyoto. On the other hand, although it is true that they approach the issue as much from the angle of energy security and supply as from that of climate change, there is an action plan to which I believe we can secure agreement at the G8, which will include specific measures to help us reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It is also important for us to have some form of continuing process that locks in not just the United States of America but the emerging countries, particularly China and India, without which it is difficult to see how we can make progress.

Mr. Kennedy: I certainly accept the last point, but the Prime Minister must be the first to recognise—given the position that he will assume in the second half of the year—that unless the American President is fully on board, it will be impossible to achieve a consensus. The Prime Minister said some time ago that action on climate change would be one of the two main planks on which his presidency of the G8 would be judged. What will he salvage at Gleneagles if the American President will not sign up?

The Prime Minister: We have not reached the stage of the summit yet, so I do not think we are quite at the salvage stage of the operation. I am not saying that we will not get there, but we are not there yet.

When we decided to make Africa and climate change the two key issues at the summit, we were setting the bar pretty high for ourselves. But I think that that is important, because in my view climate change is, in the long term, the single biggest issue that we face. The brutal truth is that unless America is involved in a process of dialogue and action in the international community, we will not make progress on that issue.

Let us wait and see where we arrive at the summit. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will be doing my very best to persuade the United States and other countries that it is important for us to act. Obviously, it will be helpful for me to be able to say that I have his full backing.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Whaley Bridge town council on being the first to achieve quality council status? Will he ensure that all town and parish councils receive the support, encouragement and guidance that they need if they are use the powers given to them by the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 to tackle antisocial behaviour at local level?

The Prime Minister: I fully endorse what my hon. Friend has said. I hope that that is the first of many instances of the change we are introducing being able to deliver real benefits on the ground in local communities.

Q2. [1879] **Simon Hughes** (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): The vast majority of the country and the House will want to congratulate the Government, the Mayor of London and the bid team on the success of the International Olympic Committee appraisal on Monday, and on the fact that the prospects of the bid for the games now look so good. Will the Prime Minister assure us that all that he and his colleagues can do will be done between now and early July to try to win the bid for London? At the same time, will he ensure that British sports policy gives every child in every school a chance to be coached by a professional, so that children have the opportunity and potential to become Olympians themselves one day?

The Prime Minister: Obviously we will do all that we can to bring about a successful outcome of the bid for the 2012 games. This is not just a London bid; it is a United Kingdom bid, and it will benefit the whole country, not just London. It gives us a tremendous opportunity to make an important contribution to the Olympic legacy and the Olympic movement.

I fully support the idea of more sport in schools. That is why the Government are making a major investment in school sports co-ordinators, to ensure that kids have the sporting opportunities that they need at school. If we reach our target of four hours of sport a week for children who want it, it will make a great difference—and not just to the health and fitness of the country. I think that sport, including competitive sport, does a great deal for a child's development, and this will be an additional way of achieving more responsible citizenship.

Q3. [1880] **John Robertson** (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work that he has done in Africa, and on his leadership of the G8.

Is my right hon. Friend aware that despite Nigeria's vast oil wealth, two thirds of its people live on less than $1 a day? Is he aware that, as a result of that poverty, young people in the Niger Delta are being recruited to militia gangs involved in bunkering, widespread violence and intimidation? Will he do all that he can to solve the problem of the Niger Delta and the corruption there? If we cannot solve the problem in Nigeria, what can we do about the rest of Africa?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has raised this issue in an Adjournment debate, and he is right to draw attention to the specific problems of trying to help Nigeria. After all, Nigeria is the largest country by population in Africa. It is extremely important that we give it special attention and special help, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and others are looking now at what we can do to help Nigeria, specifically in relation to its debts; but it is important, as part of that, that it takes the necessary action, as I know that the President of Nigeria wants to do, in rooting out corruption and ensuring the principles of good governance.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree with the President of France that the ratification process for the European constitution should continue?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear the other day—*[Interruption.]* I am afraid that he made it clear enough for me, and that is all that counts. He made it clear that, pending clarification of what has happened in France and Holland because they voted no, we do not intend to proceed with our referendum. However, what happens to the European constitution as a whole is not just a decision for Britain—it is a decision for the whole European Union—and we will be in a better position to report back to the House after we have had a discussion at the European Council in a few days' time.

Mr. Howard: But I asked the Prime Minister for his view. The President of France has said that the ratification process should continue—so has the Chancellor of Germany. Almost every other European leader has said the same thing. So are not the British people entitled to know what the British Prime Minister thinks? Does he agree with them or not?

The Prime Minister: And I have set out exactly what I think—*[Interruption]*—which is that, until the situation in France and Holland is clarified, there is no point in proceeding with the British referendum because the constitution needs the ratification of all the member states. Two member states are now in a position where they cannot ratify it. Unless that is changed, the constitution cannot proceed. All I am saying is that it is not for Britain on our own to say that the constitution is gone—it must be a decision for the whole European Council—and it gains us absolutely nothing to take a decision now about what the European Council will do, when we have the European Council in a few days' time. At present, therefore, we are not proceeding with our referendum.

Mr. Howard: Surely, the position of the French people, at any rate, is very clear. I never thought that I would hear myself saying this, but 50.5 million French people cannot be wrong.

Let me see whether I can help the Prime Minister out of his dilemma on Europe. He may have been seduced, as so many people were, by the argument that our joining the euro was inevitable. Now we know that it is not. He may have been seduced by the argument that the constitution was inevitable. Now we know that it is not. Did not last week mark the end of inevitability in Europe? Does it not present us all with a great opportunity to develop a different kind of Europe—a flexible Europe in which the European Union does less, but does it better, and starts on the process of returning powers to Britain and the other member states?

The Prime Minister: Did not the right hon. and learned Gentleman vote for the Maastricht treaty—or am I wrong about that? And I should imagine that he is proud of that. *[Interruption.]*

The important thing about any of these debates is that Britain remains at the centre of them. I believe that the constitution represents a perfectly sensible way forward for Europe. However, two countries have now said no. That means that it cannot proceed. Until that position is clarified or changed, the constitution cannot proceed. Therefore, at the present time, we are not proceeding with our referendum.

As for the single currency, I totally disagree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's position. It seems sensible to keep our options open at all times, but let me remind him that, under the type of scepticism that he represents, when we came to power in 1997, this country had no influence in Europe whatsoever. *[Interruption.]* As a result of the changes that this Government have made, it is not Britain that is now in the dock on Europe. On the contrary, we are actually leading the debate about change in Europe.

Q4. [1881] **Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Launching the National Audit Office report earlier this year, Sir John Bourn said:

"Substantial progress has been made in implementing the NHS Cancer Plan, with many targets in the Plan met or on course to be met. This should contribute to the downward trend in cancer mortality rates and continue to bring significant benefits to patients."

Locally, in both our general hospitals and the Clatterbridge centre for oncology trust, significant progress has been made. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that his Government will continue to support those trusts in the important work that they are undertaking?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. The Clatterbridge treatment centre has been a worthwhile investment of £1 million. As a result of all the changes that have been made—not just the extra money, but the reform in the treatment of cancer—99 per cent. of patients with suspected cancer are now seen by a specialist within two weeks of being urgently referred, which is up from 63 per cent. in 1997. Far more people are being referred urgently under the two-week wait, and that is not only in percentage terms because the number is about double compared with even four years ago. That is a result of the investment going into our national health service, which is, of course, entirely opposed by the Conservative party.

Q5. [1882] **Mr. David Laws** (Yeovil) (LD): In February this year, the Prime Minister's party promised urgent reform of the state pension system in this country. A couple of months later, on 22 May, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that consultation on that issue could last into the next Parliament. May we have a clear response from the Prime Minister today? Will there be major legislation for pensions reform in this Parliament—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The Pensions Commission is due to report later this year and we will bring forward proposals on the basis of the report. Whether there will be legislation depends on what those proposals are. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has quite rightly said—I repeated this during the election campaign—that if we were to introduce something such as compulsion, it would be right to go back to the electorate before that was done. Many changes could be brought into being in our pension system that would be of benefit if the commission reports in a particular way, although I do not know how it will report and we will have to wait and see what it recommends. On the basis of the report, however, I hope that we can start a debate in which it is possible to get some form of consensus—across the

parties would be the best thing—because any pension provision needs to endure for a considerable period of time. Whether or not legislation will be needed will depend on the outcome of the commission.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): A friendly question on European matters, Mr. Speaker.

After she has finished her history A-level exam, which she is sitting right now, my constituent, Eniola Aluko, will be getting ready to join her team mates in the England football squad for tonight's eight-nation European championship match against Denmark. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Eniola and the rest of the team the best of luck, and will he also consider joining other hon. Members in the Jubilee Room when the Football Association is screening the match, which, if it is anything as exciting as the match against Finland, promises to be a very entertaining occasion?

The Prime Minister: I wish the women's football team, including my hon. Friend's constituent, the very best of luck. There was a fantastic win against Finland and I hope that the team does well against Denmark. One of the most encouraging aspects of the match against Finland, quite apart from the result, was the turnout of the crowd, which was almost 30,000 and thus a good augury for the future.

Q6. [1883] **Lembit Öpik** (Montgomeryshire) (LD): The Prime Minister will know that the Scottish Parliament, and indeed yesterday the Welsh Assembly, voted against requiring identity cards for access to devolved public services. Given his known respect for, and commitment to, devolution, will he assure the House that no Labour Government will force identity cards to be a prerequisite for access to health and social services in Wales or Scotland?

The Prime Minister: First, in the initial stages, at least, identity cards are to be voluntary. If there is a move to compulsion, it will require a further vote in the House. The debate is just beginning—it will begin during the course of the Bill that we will consider shortly. I hope that there will be a full debate in which people can understand that as a result of changes in biometric technology, and especially because we will have to change passports for everyone in this country, it is a sensible next step to ensure that we can have proper protection through identity cards against fraud and abuse.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that some large pubs and clubs in our city centres have a disproportionate pull on police services and council cleansing services? Is it not about time that they made a financial contribution to pay for the policing and the clearing up of our streets?

The Prime Minister: It is important to consider that in addition to all the other powers that we want to introduce, we have already given the police the power to shut a pub or club for 24 hours and to trigger a review of the licence if fights and disorder constantly take place there. The purpose of the alcohol disorder zone is to give an additional power, in circumstances in which nothing else makes a difference, to ensure that in that area the people who run licensed premises come together and do something about the problem.

The range of new powers that have been given to the police will be valuable, but they require the full co-operation of licensed premises. On those premises where there are continual fights—Thursday, Friday, Saturday nights and at other times, too—and it is difficult for people to go into town centres without being in fear for their own safety, such behaviour is completely unacceptable. During the course of the legislation, we are determined to take whatever measures are necessary to give the police the power to stamp out the problem.

Q7. [1884] **David T.C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): If education is such a priority for this Labour Government, can the Prime Minister tell us why Torfaen Labour council is trying to shut down the best performing school in its borough? Would the Prime Minister care to investigate that matter? Will he also offer a few words of support to local parents, who will meet the council today to ask why that well run and well supported local school is being shut down by a Labour council that cannot keep its books in order?

The Prime Minister: First, I obviously do not know enough about the circumstances of the particular school, but those decisions have to be taken at a local level. If I have read correctly the Conservative party document on schooling issued a short time ago, it says that it is essential that there is greater devolution of school decisions to local people and local authorities. That local devolution is precisely what will be followed. I do not know enough about the circumstances of the individual case, but I am happy to look into it and write to the hon. Gentleman.

Q8. [1885] **Martin Salter** (Reading, West) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Thames Valley police, Reading borough council and residents of the Dee Park estate in my constituency on achieving a 26 per cent. reduction in crime as a result of the successful use of antisocial behaviour orders? However, does he agree that much more needs to be done to encourage young people to engage in constructive activities to divert them away from drugs and crime? Does he agree that respect is a two-way—

Mr. Speaker: Order. There should be only one supplementary. The hon. Gentleman asked about three.

The Prime Minister: Yes, but I agree with all three. It is important that we have measures on antisocial behaviour. Whereas they were controversial at first, they are working and have the support of practically the whole House. At the same time, however, my hon. Friend is right in saying that we have to emphasise proper youth activities. Extended schools with proper pre and after-school clubs have a role to play, as do proper youth services and facilities for our young people. I also think that although the Sure Start programme, and the extension of it, will not yield visible benefits for many years, it will play a part. That is why he is entirely right: as well as tough measures, we also need local youth provision.

Q9. [1886] **Mr. James Clappison** (Hertsmere) (Con): As the Prime Minister may be aware, last month saw the

third anniversary of the Potters Bar rail crash. Is he also aware that the bereaved families have been refused proper compensation and are still waiting for a decision on a public inquiry? Is he prepared to meet a delegation from the families to hear their case?

The Prime Minister: I shall try to get back to the hon. Gentleman with answers to the points he raises. I do not know the exact position at the present time in relation to the inquiry, but I shall look into it myself and write to him. In respect of the meeting, I cannot give a promise at this point, but I shall certainly consider it.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Prime Minister inquire into what is happening regarding the Stormont estate? I understand that a decision has been taken to sell off that beautiful estate, which is used by all the people of Northern Ireland, whatever their religion or beliefs. I think that the Prime Minister should look into the widespread rumours of the sell-off.

The Prime Minister: I am trying to work out what the shaking head of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland really means. I had better make inquiries, lest I over-interpret the sign language. I shall look into the details, but my understanding is that there is no intention to sell off Stormont or the park. I have heard of no such proposal.

BILL PRESENTED

VIOLENT CRIME REDUCTION

Mr. Secretary Clarke, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Tessa Jowell, Secretary Ruth Kelly and Hazel Blears, presented a Bill to make provision for reducing and dealing with the abuse of alcohol; to make provision about real and imitation firearms, about ammunition and about knives and other weapons; to amend the Football Spectators Act 1989 and the Football (Disorder) Act 2000; to amend the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and section 8 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; to amend section 23 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969; to amend the Mobile Telephones (Re-programming) Act 2002; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 10].

Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

EU Constitution

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, the Foreign Secretary said:

"the high representative of the European Union, was appointed . . . under the treaty of Maastricht".—[*Official Report*, 6 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 1005.]

That was a wholly inaccurate statement. Will you give a Minister an opportunity to correct the record, as I believe that the Foreign Secretary inadvertently misled the House?

Mr. Speaker: Drop a note to the Foreign Secretary. He will probably take the point.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. The position is more serious than my hon. Friend has described. In fact, the Foreign Secretary was insulting my hon. Friend by alleging that he voted for the treaty that created the new post of Foreign Minister. That was incorrect: it was done under the treaty of Amsterdam, which was introduced by the Labour party. Therefore, not only did the Foreign Secretary mislead the House, but he insulted an hon. Member. It is your duty, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will not have that said. I was here when the Foreign Secretary spoke. Had he insulted any hon. Member, I would have told him to withdraw, but he did not. As I said, if there is a feeling that an inaccurate statement was made, drop the Foreign Secretary a note. I am sure that he will appreciate hearing from the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) and the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin).

12.33 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House, in the light of the rejection of the EU Constitution by the French and the Dutch people, urges the Government to make clear its intention not to ratify the EU Constitutional Treaty, and instead to pursue a policy of a more decentralised and deregulated Europe, better suited to serving the people of Europe.

All sorts of reasons have been proposed by all sorts of people for the French and Dutch rejections of the constitution. The general view of the European political elite seems to be that those who voted yes were voting for the constitution, whereas those who voted no were voting against something else. Certainly there were domestic considerations active in both France and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the results killed off the constitution—at least they would have in any rational world that respected democratic judgments. Yet the constitution's ghost continues to stalk the corridors of the Commission as the énarques of Brussels struggle to salvage something from the wreckage. That salvage

[Dr. Liam Fox]

operation is misguided and fails to heed what the people of France and the Netherlands are telling the European political elite.

Those present in France or the Netherlands for the referendums realised that the atmosphere in the streets represented more than just a simple no to a complex legal document: it marked a shift in public opinion, away from the idea of an elite-driven Europe to a Europe run in the interests of the people of Europe. In the Netherlands, that mood was bound up with concern about the impact of rapid social change within a country over a short period, and in France with concerns about the economy. What came across strongly in both countries was a common resentment about the euro, and that from their own political perspectives they are trapped in a straitjacket that is ill suited to their economic needs.

This wider shift in the mood of the public is not confined to France and the Netherlands. The pitchforks are being dusted down all over Europe. Perhaps we have reached what my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition called the end of inevitability. We were told that membership of the euro was inevitable. Does anyone still believe that? Do even the Liberal Democrats still believe that? We were told that we had to accept the constitution because it, too, was inevitable. Politically, nothing is inevitable unless we in this House and the people of this country accept it to be so.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, in talking about the euro, he was suggesting that many of the people who voted no to the constitution in France and the Netherlands were attempting to vote no to the euro? Otherwise, why did he bring up the issue of the euro?

Dr. Fox: I can only repeat it to the hon. Lady; I cannot understand it for her. As I think I said, there were a number of issues, both domestically—relating to economics and to immigration in both France and the Netherlands—and to the constitution as a whole. What I find odd is the idea that people who voted yes were voting purely on the constitution and that those who voted no were voting on anything but the constitution, which seems to be the interpretation put on the result by too many European politicians.

What do we mean by a Europe run in the interests of its people? Some may honourably believe that it is a paternalistic centralised state. I do not. I believe that a Europe run in the interests of the people would be one where national Governments co-operate where it is in their mutual interests to do so, but retain the freedom to act on their own where their national interest is at stake.

There are areas where sovereignty can be pooled—for example, environmental policy. The challenge of climate change is a global one, and the nations of Europe must work together with others. There is no point, for example, in every nation funding identical research into different sources of renewable energy. But there are many more areas where sovereignty should not and must not be pooled.

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree, with the benefit of hindsight, that instead of going down the route of harmonisation, we should have had mutual recognition of goods and services? Does he agree that we should look again at the customs union and the terms under which we are bound by it?

Dr. Fox: I think that even Lady Thatcher would now have some considerable reservations about the form of the single market that we have. As my hon. Friend rightly says, when we decided in Europe to have a single market of harmonisation rather than a market of mutual recognition, as has been adopted in other trading blocs, that inevitably involved a body of legislation, much of which causes problems in our economic system. There is no point in running away from these issues. If we want to see a successful completion of a single market, we will have to examine what type of single market best serves the interests of the economies of Europe.

We must not be afraid of having a genuinely mature debate about Europe in the light of experience. When we do so, there are far too many worries—dare I say it, though the Chief Whip is not in his place?—driven by party political unity worries, when what is required is a genuine debate about the United Kingdom as a whole.

Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he believes that Lady Thatcher should not have signed the Single European Act? Is he saying that if he could go back in time, and was a member of the Government at that time, he would not have signed the Act?

Dr. Fox: I was not even a Member of Parliament at that time, never mind a member of the Government. As I have said, I think that even Lady Thatcher would now say that the direction which the single market ultimately took was not the direction that the British Government sought at that time, and that many of the problems that came from the single market were not anticipated at the outset.

Let us have a rational debate. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that no mistakes were ever made by previous Conservative Governments in European policy, that is preposterous, because most Conservatives would recognise that mistakes were made. We are happy to take our responsibility for where mistakes in the direction of Europe occurred. I wonder whether the Minister will.

The current temptation for the European political elite is to pick over the corpse of the constitution like a latter-day Burke and Hare, extracting the parts of the constitution most dear to their vision in the hope that they can be smuggled through without anyone noticing. That must not be allowed to happen. If the Council of Ministers seeks to introduce any mechanism that takes power away from the people of Britain and gives it to Brussels, it should not be introduced without the British

Government holding a referendum to give the people of this country their say. The House will remember that the Prime Minister told *The Sun*:

"We don't know what is going to happen in France, but we will have a referendum on the constitution in any event—and that is a government promise".

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend remind the House that that Government promise was not made exclusively on 13 May this year? It was made on 18 April by the Prime Minister and was stated formally by him to the House on 20 April 2004 at column 164 of *Hansard* in a reply to a question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory). In those circumstances, what credibility does my hon. Friend attach to the formal promises made by the Prime Minister?

Dr. Fox: I gave up attaching any credibility whatsoever to the Prime Minister's words a long time ago. One difficulty that I experienced in preparing my contribution for today's debate was the fact that the Prime Minister gave that promise on so many occasions that it was difficult to know which one to pick. My right hon. and learned Friend is quite right that the Prime Minister promised on many occasions that we would hold a referendum in any event, irrespective of what anyone else voted for. Surely, even for him, that must be difficult to wriggle out of.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr. Fox: No, I will not.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab) *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I will give way to the hon. Lady later. I have accepted many interventions in a brief period, but I shall certainly give way to one of my favourite Eurosceptics in the House.

There are areas where we must not pool our sovereignty any further. It was into those areas that the now defunct constitution wished to trespass, and which the Commission is most likely to want to cherry-pick. We cannot simply sit back and allow the European Union to acquire the trappings of statehood, such as a single diplomatic service and a president, without giving the British people a voice. It would be unthinkable to allow the European Union to sign treaties as a single legal entity—the definition of a nation state—without the people having a chance to veto such a development. The development of the post of Foreign Minister and an EU diplomatic service are part of a much longer-term plan. Let us remember what the constitution does. It proposes to give the Union increasing responsibility for the foreign and defence policies of all member states. It would allow the EU to define the collective strategic interests of member states. It would create an EU Foreign Minister to formulate and implement EU foreign policy and represent the union diplomatically. It would require member states to

"co-ordinate their action in international organizations",

to integrate and harmonise member states' defence capabilities and to provide for concerted action in the case of conflict. That represents a profound change for Britain and Europe. It is intellectually legitimate to have a vision of a united Europe. I profoundly disagree with that vision, but let us not pretend that it is an efficiency measure.

Ms Stuart: A moment ago, the hon. Gentleman started to say something interesting when he defined what kind of Europe the Opposition want. Pan-European problems may require pan-European solutions. Is he saying that we should deal with asylum—not immigration and asylum—at the European level, because that would be in our collective national interests? Is that his vision of Europe?

Dr. Fox: No; it is not. Powers over immigration and asylum should be determined by each nation state. I believe in a Europe of nation states co-operating where it is in their mutual interests to do so, but being able to act separately when their national interest requires it. On asylum and immigration, our national interest requires us to be able to act separately. The hon. Lady and I differ because she thinks that those powers should be exercised in Brussels, whereas I think that they should be exercised in this House of Commons.

No one disagrees with the proposition that an EU of 25 needs different working relationships from an EU of six. Although "institutional reform" sounds bland, it means much more than motherhood and apple pie. What is actually being proposed is the transfer of yet more powers from the people of Britain to Brussels, with the veto being given up in 63 individual areas. The reform of qualified majority voting, and with it the removal of the veto over key areas such as criminal law and justice, is another element of the constitution on which the British people must have their say.

The legal systems of the 25 current members and of possible future members vary widely in both procedure and substance. Those differences matter, because they reflect deep, culturally determined attitudes to the relationship between the citizen and the state. Beyond the specific international crimes discussed in the document, the broad notion of "judicial co-operation" challenges member states' unique approaches to criminal law. In particular, the constitution will create a European prosecutor, who will investigate and try certain types of cases. On the surface, the proposal does not sound so objectionable, but the constitution would expand the prosecutor's jurisdiction to include

"crimes affecting the interests of the Union."

At that level of generality, virtually all crimes occurring in the Union, and some that occur outside it, affect the Union's interests. Given that EU institutions would therefore be responsible for interpreting the extent of their own jurisdiction, the proposal is an unwarranted intrusion into our legal traditions and independence.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On the European public prosecutor, the hon. Gentleman often discusses fraud in the EU in public, on the television and radio and in this House. He knows that 85 per cent. of EU-related fraud is perpetrated within member states when member states spend EU money and that a European public prosecutor is the only way to tackle those cases. Why will he not agree to such a post?

[Dr. Fox]

Dr. Fox: There is no logic to that argument. The situation would be better if the EU Commissioners tackled fraud in the EU rather than whistleblowers. All too often, those who run the EU—in particular, the Commissioners—turn a blind eye to endemic fraud and waste because it does not suit their short-term political agenda to deal with it. The EU needs a system in which the Court of Auditors is willing to sign off the accounts, which did not happen for 10 years under the current system. If that were to happen to a British company, we all know what the consequences would be. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman has made his intervention, and I am sure that he will make an interesting speech that keeps hon. Members glued to their seats.

The constitution would also build on the European convention on human rights, with the proposed charter of fundamental rights as the bedrock of constitutional law in the EU. Judges in Brussels would accrue immense power over the interpretation of legislation, and thus over the people of this country. Once again, power would be transferred, and it is yet another element of the constitution on which the British people should have their say.

Iain Murray, a senior fellow in the international policy group at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, has made some interesting comparisons between the charter and the US Bill of Rights:

"As we all know, the American Bill of Rights is couched mostly in negative terms, forbidding government from certain action. The European charter, however, is couched in positive terms, bestowing rights upon citizens by the grace of its actions . . . The EU constitution is in many ways the complete opposite of the US Constitution. It protects institutions' powers and enumerates rights. It limits its member states' freedom while accruing powers based on one political world view to the centre".

He has also pointed out one great contradiction in the charter:

"the charter contains a get-out clause. Any of these rights may be limited in the interest of meeting 'objectives of general interest recognised by the Union.' A raison d'etat is thereby enshrined in the constitution. Presumably this is how the EU will reconcile its actions against 'xenophobia' with the general principle of freedom of expression."

But one of the best summaries of the failures of the constitution that I have yet read—it is available from the Library—came from Jonathan Kallmer, an attorney in Washington who practises international litigation and arbitration. He wrote:

"The problem is not precisely that the constitution is too ambitious; constitutions should be ambitious. The problem is that it is ambitious in ways that exacerbate the problems it was meant to remedy. The European Union has achieved great things, but part of the virtue of doing great things is recognising what cannot be done. All of the draft constitution's flaws flow directly or indirectly from its framers' failure to recognise limits."

He continued:

"The essential merits of a constitution are found as much in the process as in the substance. An effective constitutional document not only sets out the core rights of citizens and the basic structures of government, but does so in a way that is clear, concise, and accessible. A constitution is for people, not bureaucrats, and it is imperative that it speaks as plainly as possible. The European draft constitution shows few of these procedural virtues."

Finally, he noted:

"At over 200 pages the document is simply too long. If it takes that much paper to discuss fundamental values and a clear institutional structure, it is likely that the values are not fundamental and the institutional structure is not clear."

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that if this vision of the decentralised European Union that he would like to see were to come about, that would in itself need a new constitutional treaty, the agreement of all 25 Governments, and the agreement of the people of all 25 states by referendum or whatever means? Does he further accept that there is not the remotest chance of that happening, and that the ultimate position therefore is that the Conservatives will either have to accept membership of a European Union that they do not really like or seek to withdraw from it?

Dr. Fox: There we have a perfect example of the inevitability that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) was talking about earlier—"It is inevitable, therefore we are powerless to do anything about it; it is inevitable, therefore we should not try; it is inevitable, therefore we must take what we are given." What sort of attitude is that for any Government of the United Kingdom to have? We should set out what we believe to be in Britain's national interest and fight for it—without which, incidentally, there would be no rebate for the current Government to be defending at the present time.

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): May I suggest to my hon. Friend that in every piece of European legislation to be enacted in this country we have to amend the European Communities Act 1972? It is always one way, however. There is no reason why we should not amend that Act to bring back powers to this country, for example on fisheries policy, without coming out of the European Union.

Dr. Fox: It is a great shame that the debate on Europe is always reduced to an oversimplified debate based on, "You have to be in or you have to be out." That is the argument beloved of the Government when they put forward the inevitability of our having to swallow everything that we are given because the alternative is to leave the European Union. That is a fundamentally dishonest way of portraying the debate on Europe. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct—there are other ways in which we could achieve the results that we want, and it is time that this country, in a reasonably mature way, started that debate. We have nothing to be afraid of, because if we fail, the consequences are grim not only for the United Kingdom but for Europe as a whole. That is the issue to which I shall turn in a moment.

We cannot accept this constitution either in whole or in part. We think that it is bad for Britain and bad for Europe. Yet less than half an hour ago in this House, the Prime Minister described it as "a perfectly sensible way forward."

We know that many in the European institutions still seem intent on ignoring the democratic will of voters and trying to resurrect their creature. Only two weeks ago, the present holder of the EU presidency said:

"the countries that have said no will have to ask themselves the question again".

Again, we seek clarity from the Government. Last year, the Prime Minister told this House:

"There is no question of any constitutional treaty going through without the express consent of the British people . . . Regardless of how other members vote, we will have a referendum on the subject".—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2004; Vol. 422, c. 1090.]

When he returns from the summit, the Prime Minister must come to this House and either tell us that the ratification process is over or reintroduce the legislation and hold a referendum in this country as soon as possible.

Mr. Jenkin: I am listening to my hon. Friend very carefully and with great interest, because I think he is presaging a major shift in the policy of our party towards the European Union in the aftermath of the referendums.

Could he deal with the comment that the Leader of the House made from a sedentary position, which he may not have heard, to the effect that if we were somehow to legislate unilaterally to retrieve certain powers, we would instantly have to leave the European Union? Would my hon. Friend explain to him that it is most unlikely that the other member states would instantly wish to expel us and that they might want to negotiate about it?

Dr. Fox: As you, Mr. Speaker, might have said, the Leader of the House is in his place and will have heard what my hon. Friend has said. No doubt when his colleagues have worked out the point he is trying to make we will hear it again from the Labour Benches.

The death of the European constitution provides us with a moment to stop and think again about the direction in which Europe is heading. Referring to the four big treaty negotiations since 1985, Sir Stephen Wall, a former ambassador to the EU, said:

"to an extent, all of them have been a proxy for the one negotiation the union has not had: how to define its modern vision, purpose and relevance".

That is the debate that we now need to have.

Mr. Robin Cook (Livingston) (Lab): May I return the hon. Gentleman to the amendment that he has put before the House? Is he aware that nobody would be more delighted if that were carried than President Chirac of France? President Chirac himself has not made it clear whether France will not now ratify the treaty, and he would just love to be let off the hook by being able to say, "There's no point in ratifying because Britain has said it will not." Opposition Front Benchers are not noted for their affection for France. Can the hon. Gentleman explain why he thinks it smart to let France out of the corner that it has painted itself into and at the same time make Britain unpopular with all the countries that have ratified?

Dr. Fox: This may come as something of a shock to the culture of new Labour, but the reason why the French did not ratify is that the French people said no. When we start putting high politics and diplomatic etiquette above the democratic will of the people of Europe, we are in a very sorry state. I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman has fallen into the trap of trying to play games with what is a very clear rejection of this treaty, in democratic referendums, by the people of France and the people of the Netherlands. Either we accept the democratic will of the people or we do not.

As we embark on this debate, it is worth remembering how we got to this point and making an assessment of the balance sheet of the Common Market, the European Community and, now, the European Union. I readily admit that many in this House will remember the 1975 referendum more vividly than I do. I remember it primarily because my parents campaigned strongly on opposite sides. My father supported the yes campaign. Like many others at the time, he did not want to see his children involved in a European war and believed that membership would bring greater trade and prosperity. My mother supported the no campaign. She believed membership would be a straitjacket and went against the grain of British historical experience. They typified the divisions up and down the country—divisions that still exist today.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): In the Conservative party.

Dr. Fox: The Leader of the House says, "In the Conservative party." These divisions run very deeply right through all parties. The right hon. Gentleman may want to trivialise the debate, but I am sure that when he hears the speeches of Members sitting behind him he will have his illusions shattered.

Those who take a very positive view of the European experience claim that peace and stability, higher standards of living and a better understanding of our neighbours' cultures have been the primary benefits. They point out that EU member states have had an almost unprecedented period of peace and stability since the end of world war two. They say that membership has also had the effect of encouraging aspirant members in less stable parts of Europe to settle their differences and that the EU helped to bring about the end of the cold war. They believe that EC laws have resulted in higher standards in many areas such as employment and the environment, and that the ability to access European funds has transformed the economies of countries such as Ireland and Spain.

Those who take a more sceptical view would claim that Germany as a stable democracy is not a threat to European security, and that the cold war was won by the military might of NATO, combined with the political strength of British and American leaders at a time when many European Governments had succumbed to the unilateralist tendency, as had the Labour party. They claim that loss of sovereignty has been too high a price to pay: more majority voting; the loss of the national veto, and the encroachment of the EU on matters such as human rights, health care and foreign and security policy. They point to the cost of being in the EU, the amount of legislation from Brussels and the over-regulation, fraud and corruption. They believe that, if allowed to continue unchecked, interference in national customs—perhaps best typified in Britain by the "metric martyrs" case—will persist. They say that the common

[Dr. Fox]

agricultural policy, which roughly doubles food prices here, is unfair to developing countries, and corrupt, absurd and completely discredited. It could also be argued that closer links to other European citizens have been achieved through travel and the greater interface between students, artists and scientists. None of them require an institution to make them happy.

What are the facts? Civitas recently examined the cost of membership, in a report that I recommend to all hon. Members. The study suggested that the largest cost comes from EU red tape. Regulations implemented since 1999 cost British business £6.3 billion a year. The total cost of all EU regulations is at least £20 billion a year. The CAP costs the UK approximately £9 billion a year, while the net cost of payments to Brussels totals around £4.3 billion a year.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned regulations. Does he agree that, although the Government say much about deregulation and trying to help small businesses and wealth creation, the time has come to get rid of the job-destroying social chapter?

Dr. Fox: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall consider the things that need to change shortly. However, as regards the example that he gives, the Conservative Government stood strongly against something that the socialists swept in as soon as they possibly could.

Changing demographics in Europe are likely to affect economic performance. A study that the City consultant Makinson Cowell published points to the problems of falling fertility rates and greater longevity. By 2010, the EU's working-age population will have begun a permanent decline. Over the next 40 years, the working-age populations of Germany, Italy and Spain will fall by a third. That will have a major impact on the European economy. The EU's projections suggest that economic growth in Europe will be only half that of America between now and 2050. Projected forward, the EU's share of global gross domestic product will slump from 18 per cent. now to only 10 per cent. by the middle of the century, while America's will rise from 23 per cent. to 26 per cent.

It is not only that the Anglo-Saxon economies of Britain, America and Australia are outperforming Europe, but, when faced with the challenge of competing with China, South Asia, India or the United States, the EU is beginning to look like an economic irrelevance.

None of the figures should give us comfort. Even if we interpret them as a sign not of European weakness but of British strength, we will still feel the effects of a faltering European economy.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The shadow Secretary of State is making an interesting speech, which might stand him in good stead—who knows? However, like the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), I detected a shift in policy. In the earlier passages of his speech, he appeared to suggest that the Conservative party could support a constitution, with the proviso that it had the clarity of thought and limitations of the American constitution and Bill of Rights. Did I interpret that correctly?

Dr. Fox: Not for the first time, no.

What can be done? The big European economies such as France and Germany need to understand that the improved performance of the United Kingdom is based on the supply-side reforms—Conservative reforms—that were introduced in the 1980s. It will not be possible to maintain economies based on the European social model and compete successfully in an ever-more rigorous world economy. The burden of excessive regulation must be stripped away. A genuinely competitive single market must be completed, with more powers operated nationally, in line with the true principle of subsidiarity. We must also consider, as Civitas put it, the radical overhaul of the CAP, the removal of all external EU tariffs and the reaffirmation that EU members should not be responsible for each other's pension liabilities. Those are not definitive solutions but the beginning of a necessary debate.

Ed Balls (Normanton) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: I will not; I have given way several times already.

We can also build on the success of the accession countries, economically and politically. We have just reason in this country to be proud of having championed their cause. Approximately 15,000 UK companies export or invest in central Europe, attracted by the low costs of operating from that area. Three quarters of those are small to medium-sized, with fewer than 250 employees, but many are big City firms, particularly of lawyers and accountants. Since 1990, UK trade with the accession countries has increased nearly 10 times as fast as trade with the rest of the world. Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic now proudly have Tesco stores.

However, the economic freedom inevitably has an effect on the centralising tendency that is so close to the heart of Europe's political elite.

Ed Balls: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: I have told the hon. Gentleman that I shall not give way.

As *The Economist* put it,

"whereas the traditional builders of Europe were suspicious of nationalism and keen to build up supranational institutions at the expense of the nation state, many of the Central Europeans are still joyfully reasserting their own national identities after decades of Soviet domination. As Vaclav Havel said, 'the concept of national sovereignty is something inviolable'."

That lesson has still to be learned by some of Europe's old masters. Last year, President Chirac slapped down accession states for daring to disagree with French policy on Iraq, and Chancellor Schröder threatens new EU states that use low tax rates to undercut German industry with financial retaliation.

Europe needs to have a genuine debate as we stand at the current crossroads. Yes, there have been many achievements, not least the liberation and stabilisation

of Spain, Greece and Portugal, and subsequently the former east European states, from dictatorship to democracy. However, there are also many negative entries on the balance sheet.

The French and Dutch voters have done us all a great favour. They have stopped in its tracks a constitution that would have taken Europe in entirely the wrong direction. Perhaps the signing of the constitution by our Prime Minister was the high-water mark of European integration. We now have the chance to develop a more flexible Europe, which is more outward-looking, less centralised, less bureaucratic, more trusting of national identity, and designed to be the servant, not the master, of its citizens. The UK must champion that agenda with leadership and courage. Nothing is inevitable; change is possible. All that is required is the strength, belief and courage to see it through.

1.7 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"endorses the Statement of 6th June by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, which set out the Government's response to the results of the French and Dutch referenda on the EU Constitutional Treaty; recognises that discussions will now take place on the future of the Constitutional Treaty between European leaders collectively; and agrees that the EU should uphold the concept of subsidiarity and pursue greater flexibility and better regulation, and continue the contribution it has made to peace, democracy and prosperity over recent decades for the benefit of the people of Europe."

I begin, on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, by extending his apologies to the House for his absence. My right hon. Friend is in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The tone and tenor of the shadow Foreign Secretary's speech, not least his equivocation about Baroness Thatcher's view of the single market, reminded me why Europe, perhaps more than all other issues, has wrecked the Tory party and removed its prospects of power for well over a decade. Labour Members recognise that, with more than half our trade being with Europe, more than 3 million jobs linked directly or indirectly to exports to Europe and 750,000 British-based companies trading in the European Union, Britain's national interest is—and should continue to be—advanced by our engagement with the EU.

We further acknowledge that, on challenges as broad and diverse as environmental degradation and global poverty, Europe working together cannot only extend Britain's influence but can be a powerful and positive force for good, as we saw last month, when EU Development Ministers agreed a new collective target for overseas development assistance of 0.56 per cent. of EU gross national income by 2010. Only yesterday, EU Finance Ministers endorsed the commitment by the 15 richer EU member states to reach the United Nations overseas development assistance international target of 0.7 per cent. by 2015 and the agreement by the other 10 member states to work towards 0.33 per cent. on the same time scale. That will more than double EU aid in less than 10 years.

In my remarks today, I will reiterate the Government's response to the results of the French and Dutch referendums on the EU constitutional treaty. I will then address the wider case for economic reform in Europe and reaffirm that the Government will not act in a way that undermines the EU's continuing contribution to peace, stability and prosperity in Europe.

Dr. Fox: Will the Minister tell us, given the events of recent times, whether the Government are still committed in principle to joining the euro?

Mr. Alexander: The position in relation to the euro stands apart from the constitutional treaty and remains as stated by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in October 1997. Although, in principle, we support a European single currency, in Britain's case, it has to be based on an economic assessment—the five tests—and, ultimately, on the judgment of the British people. There would be a decision in Cabinet, in Parliament and, ultimately, a decision by the British people. There has been no change whatever in the British position in that regard.

This debate takes place just a week before the customary debate preceding the European Council meeting, which will take place this year on 16 June, and two days after the Foreign Secretary addressed the House on its return from the Whitsun recess on the Government's response to the referendum results in France and the Netherlands. The House has been and remains divided on the merits of the constitutional treaty, as we have heard again today. The Government believe that it represents a sensible set of rules for the enlarged European Union, including a reduction in the size of the European Commission; a much better voting system, which benefits the UK; an end to the six-month rotating presidency, with replacement by a full-time President of the Council and team presidencies; and better arrangements for involving national Parliaments in EU legislation. The treaty, of course, requires ratification by every EU member state before it can come into force. To date, 10 member states have approved the treaty and, as the House is aware, two member states—France and the Netherlands—have, in recent days, rejected it in referendums.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): May I congratulate the Minister on the magnificence of his achievements since his appointment? In only four weeks, he has transformed Britain's relationship with Europe. When I heard that he had been appointed, I did not anticipate that he would be able, in such a short period, to preside over a French no, a Dutch no and the destruction—although he cannot possibly say so—of the constitution. Can he tell us what he is going to do for an encore?

Mr. Alexander: The warmth of that intervention gives the lie to the idea that Labour Members are divided on the issue, as the shadow Foreign Secretary suggested.

The constitutional treaty was the subject of detailed negotiation between member states, was agreed by all European leaders and is the property of the European Union as a whole. It is not, therefore, as the Opposition have suggested again today, for the UK alone to decide the future of the treaty. Rather, it is for European leaders to reach conclusions on how to deal with the situation that has now arisen in light of the French and Dutch referendums.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the European Defence Agency was nowhere mentioned or conjured up in the Maastricht treaty, in contrast to what was put on the record in the House yesterday by the Foreign Secretary? Why is it that the British people could not have a vote on the establishment of the European Defence Agency and its rearmament programme, which is set out clearly in the draft constitution? Under the Conservatives, it was rightly said that the main point of the Maastricht treaty, the euro, would always require a referendum, and I am glad that we never made the mistake of joining it.

Mr. Alexander: The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of points. His point about the Foreign Secretary has already been dealt with by Mr. Speaker. As for the European Defence Agency, it is worth bearing it in mind that the legal basis on which it was established preceded the new constitutional treaty. It is headed by a British civil servant and is undertaking important work on European procurement.

It is also worth bearing it in mind, not least in the light of the wide-ranging speech by the shadow Foreign Secretary, that the idea of a European common security and defence policy was first mooted by Baroness Thatcher in 1984. If we look at the Maastricht treaty in terms of a common security and foreign policy, it was a Conservative Government who advocated at that stage working more closely with European partners. That emphasises further the extent to which the Conservatives have moved from the mainstream of debate on Europe to the very margins. Macmillan led the discussions with de Gaulle in the 1950s. In the 1970s, Edward Heath was central to the debate about Britain's future with Europe. It is not a coincidence that the period when the Conservatives have moved into Euroscepticism is the period when they have been in opposition.

Mr. Jenkin: When the Minister has been in the job a little longer, he will discover that there was no question of any autonomous defence capability in the European Union until the Prime Minister made the agreement at St. Malo. That was a fundamental change in policy. Before the Minister starts taking instructions from the former Secretary of State for Defence, who is sitting beside him, they both know well that that has put the cat among the pigeons in NATO. It is undermining NATO. We should have a referendum on it before it goes any further. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood).

Mr. Alexander: The common defence policy was referred to in the Maastricht treaty. It is worth bearing in mind the long journey that the Conservative party has been on since the hon. Gentleman's time in the shadow Cabinet and beyond. It is for the Conservative party, rather than the Government, to explain the contradictions between its position a few years ago in opposition and today.

Mr. Salmond: We all understand why the Prime Minister has put the referendum into cold storage, but why was the Minister so definite in the House only two weeks ago in saying that there would be a referendum, come what may? Other Ministers at the time, even senior ones, were equivocating.

Mr. Alexander: If the hon. Gentleman were to reflect on the words in *Hansard*, he would see that I simply quoted the words of the Prime Minister, who set out the Government's position that, in the UK, the process of ratification for a constitutional treaty would be taken forward by means of a referendum. That continues to be the Government's position. Notwithstanding the speculation, there is no suggestion otherwise than that a constitutional treaty would be ratified in the UK by means of a referendum. The Prime Minister was drawing a distinction between the position in the UK, where we have said that that would be done by means of a referendum, and the position in other countries, where other procedures are being adopted. It is for other countries to determine the process of ratification to be followed in their countries.

Mr. Salmond: The quote from the Prime Minister was not that at all. The quote from the Prime Minister that the Minister used two weeks ago was:

"I've always said we'll have a vote on the constitution. It doesn't matter what other countries do; we'll have a vote on the constitution."

That is not the position that the Minister has just outlined. Will he explain why he was so definite two weeks ago?

Mr. Alexander: I am happy to trade quotes from the Prime Minister with the hon. Gentleman. On the same day, the Prime Minister said:

"You can't have a vote on nothing."

That sums up the position exactly. If there is a constitutional treaty that we are taking forward and ratifying, it will be by means of a referendum.

Dr. Fox: To help the Minister perhaps out of the dog's dinner of a policy that he finds himself in, since he is so close to the Prime Minister, will he tell us whether, at the summit next week, the Prime Minister, on behalf of the British Government, will press the other Governments, in light of the Dutch and French referendums, to drop the ratification process?

Mr. Alexander: We have recognised that the process of ratification is in serious difficulty in light of the decisive votes in the Netherlands and France. In the first instance, the Prime Minister will, appropriately, want to hear from the French and Dutch Governments about how they will respond to the decisions by the French and Dutch peoples. Clearly, as I have set out, there is a need for further discussions with EU partners and further decisions by European Union Governments on the matter. The first opportunity for that collective discussion, as has been anticipated in today's debate, will arise at the end of next week when Heads of State and Government meet in the European Council, before which there will be a further opportunity for debate in this House.

That is the context in which the Government have decided not to set a date for Second Reading of the European Union Bill until the consequences of the

French and Dutch decisions, and their effect on the process of ratification of the treaty, are clarified. As the Government have already informed the House, we reserve completely the right to bring the Bill back for consideration if circumstances change, but we see no point in doing so at the moment.

Mr. Robin Cook: Before my right hon. Friend gives way to any more Conservative Members demanding a referendum, I am anxious to ask him to remind the House when we had a referendum on the Maastricht treaty or on the Single European Act, which introduced a record amount of qualified majority voting or on the decision by a Conservative Government to take Britain into the common market? Are we to add all those failures to hold a referendum to the mistakes that previous Conservative Governments have made? Were all three previous Conservative Prime Ministers wrong throughout about Europe?

Mr. Alexander: I could not have framed the question better myself. The fact is that, if we look back more than 30 years to the referendum that took place, it is clear that Conservative Members now need to answer—perhaps it will provide an opportunity for the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) when he winds up the debate—whether it is the party's clear position that it regrets the fact that there was no referendum on Maastricht or, indeed, on the Single European Act, about which there seemed to be considerable equivocation in the remarks of the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): We really want to know the Government's position at the European Council next week. If a majority decision were taken at that Council to continue with ratification, would the Government obey it or disregard it?

Mr. Alexander: I cannot anticipate the position of the Council, not least in light of the fact that discussions are under way between European Heads of State as we speak. At this stage, it is appropriate for the Government to say only that we are moving forward with those discussions and that there will be a further opportunity for debate in the House ahead of the European Council, so the hon. Gentleman will have to wait a little longer.

Ed Balls: I am sure that my right hon. Friend listened carefully to the speech of the shadow Foreign Secretary and tried to discern, as did I, the change in European policy that is taking place in the Conservative party, and the principles that underpin the Tory approach to a referendum. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the shadow Foreign Secretary appeared to be saying that his mother, rather than his father, had been more influential in the shaping of his views on Europe, and that there should have been a referendum on both the Single European Act and the Maastricht treaty? Does he further agree that the hon. Gentleman would have voted against the Single European Act and, if so, that that would take us even further away from the prosperous, full-employment Europe that we want to see?

Mr. Alexander: My hon. Friend makes the important point that, following the shadow Foreign Secretary's contribution today, we are none the wiser as to his position on referendums as we look back to the Single European Act and Maastricht. My hon. Friend makes another important point—that the uncertainty and ambivalence is not limited solely to the issue of referendums, because it applies to the more fundamental issue of renegotiation. If we examine the Conservative manifesto, on which the party decisively lost just a month ago, we find explicit reference to the fact that the Conservatives would seek to repatriate powers in respect of the common fisheries policy, for example. In the light of at least one intervention today, the statements contained in the manifesto presage an even more fundamental shift in the Conservative party position.

We need to recognise that while, even a few years ago, the idea of renegotiation on the way to exiting the EU was regarded as being of only marginal interest to the more extreme fringes of the Conservative party, it now appears to be becoming the ruling orthodoxy of the shadow Cabinet. In that context, the repeated assertion by the shadow Foreign Secretary today that renegotiation matters and somehow represents Britain's national interest poses the further question—it could, ideally, be answered by the shadow Minister when he winds up the debate—of the specific areas in which the Conservatives are seeking to renegotiate the existing European treaties?

There is clearly uncertainty within the shadow Cabinet. I appreciate that a leadership election is under way in the Conservative party, but does the party policy include the sort of fundamental renegotiation of rights anticipated by the shadow Secretary of State for Deregulation or is it limited simply to what was contained in the Conservative manifesto? Perhaps the shadow Minister will clarify the position when he addresses the House later.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Why is the Minister so amazed at the word "renegotiation"? The Convention on the Future of Europe was a giant renegotiation of all the existing treaties that were going to be abolished. The Minister did not engage with it with sufficient determination to make it a success. We wish to do so in order to achieve a genuine, democratic Europe that is closer to its citizens. So yes, we believe in renegotiation and yes, the Minister's party tried and failed to deal with it.

Mr. Alexander: I am not taking that intervention seriously. It once again opens up wide the clear divisions within the Conservative party. It is not necessary to listen to my views on the matter. Let us consider the views of the former Prime Minister, John Major, who said that the policy of renegotiation was "absurd, mad". Those were the words of the Prime Minister under whom the shadow Foreign Secretary served during his time in the Foreign Office. Equally, we could reflect on the views of the right hon. and learned Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind), who is now serving in the shadow Cabinet:

> "Already there are those calling for the Tory Party to demand the renegotiation of Britain's membership of the European Union; a call which is little more than a euphemism for us to quit Europe."

[Mr. Alexander]

Frankly, the divisions that exist on the issue of renegotiation are most apparent among Conservative Members.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Alexander: I have been generous with the House and I want to make some progress.

Amidst the current headlines and debates on the constitutional treaty, it is all too easy to lose sight of the underlying reality that there is an economic transformation taking place of even greater long-term significance than the political transformation achieved by enlargement—and that is the process of globalisation.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Alexander: I have already been generous, but I shall give way in due course.

Europe needs to adapt to the changing balance of global economic activity and the rise of fast-growing emerging economies, notably those of China and India. Rapid technological change, global capital flows and the global sourcing of products are leading to an increasingly competitive international market for goods, services and investment. The most successful economies will be those that can adapt quickly to change and promote enterprise, productivity and innovation.

That process of change challenges Europe economically, socially and politically. It demands concerted action to strengthen key drivers of growth such as levels of employment. It calls for greater flexibility in product, labour and capital markets to ensure that Europe's businesses and individuals are equipped to adapt to economic change and take advantage of new opportunities when they arise. Structural reform which promotes flexibility and fairness together is the key to success in the modern global economy. That is why advancing the economic reform agenda will be a key priority for the UK when we assume the presidency on 1 July. As the House well knows, the UK has long advocated economic reform in the EU, but as the Kok report confirmed, we risk falling far short of the goals set by EU leaders in Lisbon just five years ago to improve EU competitiveness and create full employment by 2010. With 19 million Europeans out of work, the main task for those who believe in social Europe is to get Europe back to work.

Vital to that is the task of tackling regulation. Twelve European countries, including the UK, have signed up to our better regulation agenda. European legislation can bring down barriers and improve competitiveness in Europe, but it needs to be high-quality legislation, properly tested for its potential costs and benefits.

Angela Browning: Why do the Minister and the Government amendment persist in talking about "better regulation"? We have already had the Better Regulation Task Force, but it did not bring less regulation. What we want is less regulation, not better regulation.

Mr. Alexander: That intervention yet again exposes the fundamental divide between Conservative and Labour Members. The argument that we do not need more regulation was precisely that used to oppose extending paternity leave and the introduction of a national minimum wage in the UK. There is, of course, a case for appropriately targeted and relevant legislation, whether it comes from Europe or Britain, but the approach that she advocates shows that, whether at the British or European level, there is an unthinking determination among the Conservatives to remove social protection rather than have an informed debate about it. As the shadow Foreign Secretary acknowledged, such a debate would be necessary to carry forward such work.

Rev. Ian Paisley: May I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, during a debate in the House on 18 May, I asked him a specific question on this matter? I said:

"Surely it will be the people of this country who will decide whether the treaty is British or not, not some French politician who has an axe to grind in another place."

The Minister replied that

"as part of that process of ratification there will be a vote by the people of Britain. On that, at least, the hon. Gentleman and I have common ground."—[*Official Report*, 18 May 2005; Vol. 434, c. 155.]

Has he now lost that common ground?

Mr. Alexander: The quotation that the hon. Gentleman reads out reflected the assumption that the process of ratification would be taken forward. What we have established in recent days, in the light of the decisive vote by the French and Dutch people, is that the treaty is in a period of uncertainty ahead of the European Council. European leaders need to come to terms with where the process of ratification now lies, not least in the Netherlands and France, in the light of the decisive recent results about which the hon. Gentleman indicated concern in his original question in the House.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): The Minister was sniffily dismissive of the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning), but the point stands that the burden of regulation is excessive, remorseless, disproportionate to need and beyond the capacity of member states to pay for, without damaging competitiveness. I ask the Minister in all sincerity—I sign up to the principle of economic reform—whether he accepts that a powerful argument can be made within the EU for the adoption of the principle of sunset regulation so that the process is not always one way and is not a continuing ratchet in favour of greater regulation without regard to the interests of business and the workplace.

Mr. Alexander: That is an important point, and it is well taken. However, the use of sunset clauses depends on circumstances. For example, we would not want the changes that we support in respect of economic reform to be sunsetted, as we want that reform process to go forward. I shall expand on some of the specific matters involved in better regulation in the remarks that I am about to make.

Twelve European countries, including the UK, have signed up to the better regulation agenda. The legislation must be properly tested for both potential

benefits and costs. During our presidency, therefore, we intend to focus on improving the policy-making process through better consultation and the assessment of the impact of proposed legislation on business and on the EU's international competitiveness. Our fundamental goal is to reduce the volume and complexity of EU legislation and to review the impact and outcomes of existing legislation. I think that there is common ground in the House on that at least.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): Much has been made of regulation and deregulation in this debate so far, but does my right hon. Friend agree that deflation is the big problem in the eurozone at present? There is a black hole in economic demand at a time when it should be high. The most successful period in European economics was in the post-war era, when economies were highly regulated but there was high consumer demand.

Mr. Alexander: It would not be appropriate for me to comment in this debate on the macro-economic strategies being adopted by other European countries, but I take issue with my hon. Friend's suggestion that the European economy in the 1960s and 1970s offers a model for the way forward in the 21st century. In the period to which he refers, the global economy was relatively closed, whereas it is much more globalised now. We must recognise that Europe faces particular challenges and that they are as significant as was the challenge of developing peace and stability in the second half of the 20th century. For example, the rise of China and India was never anticipated in the era that he describes with such enthusiasm.

During our presidency, we also want to make progress on the services directive. That directive has a strong focus on better regulation and aims to cut excessive bureaucracy that prevents businesses from offering services across borders or opening premises in other members states. Extending the internal market to the services sector, which represents around 70 per cent. of EU GDP, will be of enormous benefit to businesses and consumers alike.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): The Minister referred to the decisions that he hopes will be taken under the British presidency. One provision of the constitution that no doubt he would have promoted in a referendum is that the Council of Ministers should take its decisions in public. That does not require a treaty or any legislation. Will the British presidency meet in public?

Mr. Alexander: I am intrigued to hear Opposition Members doing what the Government were accused of in a debate in this Chamber only a couple of days ago. I would have no objection to the European Council considering legislation in public, but it is for the shadow Foreign Secretary to explain whether Opposition Members commonly hold that view or whether a referendum on the matter is required.

In the financial services sector, our focus will be on completing the financial services action plan in a way that protects and promotes the competitiveness of the UK and EU.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: No, as I have been generous and want to make some progress.

We will also take forward the Commission's excellent Green Paper on the post-financial services action plan agenda to ensure better implementation and enforcement of measures affecting the financial sector, the use of alternatives to regulation and a clearer recognition of the global nature of financial services. *[Interruption.]* Although the shadow Foreign Secretary was not generous in giving way to newer hon. Members, I shall not make the same error. I therefore give way to the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie).

Adam Afriyie: I thank the Minister for giving way. My question is fairly simple. A promise was made that a referendum would be held so that the British people could have their say on the EU constitution: will the Government apologise for not providing that referendum?

Mr. Alexander: I am not entirely clear that that intervention was worth waiting for. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has been listening to my remarks, and that he will also attend the debate that will take place in this House ahead of the European Council in just seven days' time.

Strengthening economic co-operation between the EU and the US is also a priority for the UK, as was made clear at Prime Minister's Question Time today. We will want to build on the work under way in the context of this month's EU-US summit and demonstrate clear progress in breaking down barriers to trade and investment in key areas.

The European Council next week will look at the EU budget for the period 2007 to 2013. That debate is part of the wider debate on how Europe responds to globalisation. Where can EU spending bring the greatest added value? That is the question. We think that the answer is clear, and it is that we must reduce the income gap between old and new member states and provide Europe with the means to strengthen research and development in the most competitive sectors of the global economy. We are convinced that the EU can do that within a budget of 1 per cent. of EU gross national income.

Of course, there is a lot of talk across Europe at present about the UK rebate. The rebate exists because of the particularly low level of UK receipts from the EU and our above average contributions to the EU budget. That situation has not changed since the Fontainebleau summit of 1984, to which reference has been made already in this debate. It will not change in the next decade either. That is why the rebate remains justified and why we will use the veto, as is our right, to defend our national interest.

As I have said, the EU's future prosperity depends on being able to compete in a global world. That requires strong economic performance, but it also means having strong political partnerships across the globe.

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Alexander: No, as I have been generous and want to make progress.

[Mr. Alexander]

During our presidency, we will take forward work to build up the EU's partnerships with its neighbours in the middle east and north Africa and in eastern Europe, not least with those countries aspiring to EU membership. Last December's European Council agreed to open accession negotiations with Turkey on 3 October this year. The prospect of EU membership has been one of the most significant spurs to political and economic reform in Turkey—a matter that I am glad to say has found cross-party consensus in this House. A stable and prosperous Turkey demonstrating that Islam, democracy and a respect for human rights and the rule of law are fully compatible would have a huge impact on regional peace and stability.

During our presidency, the UK will also lead the EU's efforts to help tackle poverty in Africa, in line with our objectives for the UK presidency of the G8 and the recommendations of the Commission for Africa. Part of that will be pressing ahead with the reform of the common agricultural policy. The next big issue is reform of the archaic sugar regime, which will fall to our presidency. Getting that right is an important part of delivering a broader agenda and a broader agreement at the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December, which will bring greater development through freer and fairer trade.

We will also work with our EU partners to ensure that the EU continues to play a leading role in reinvigorating the international negotiations on climate change. That will include engaging countries such as China and India. We will explore options for a post-Kyoto strategy and try to develop stronger co-operation and real dialogue with key international partners on ways of securing low-cost emissions reductions.

Mr. Goodman: The Minister is outlining some of the challenges facing Europe, but Peter Mandelson has said that they are so serious that it is essential that the Prime Minister stay in office for another two or three years. Has the Minister discussed the matter with Peter Mandelson and, if so, what is his opinion?

Mr. Alexander: With respect, the EU Trade Commissioner has plenty of other matters that require his attention at present, and they have a direct bearing on British jobs and prosperity. It would stretch the House's credulity to suggest that the future of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was uppermost in the minds of either Dutch of French voters last week.

The challenges facing the EU both within its borders and in the wider world are considerable but they can be met. Taken together, the EU accounts for a quarter of world GDP, a third of world trade, 50 per cent. of the UN budget and 55 per cent. of global development aid. It would be wrong and wholly contrary to turn away from Europe now. One in eight members of the UN are members of the EU, so the EU has a vital role to play in international security and global development.

The EU has long been a beacon of peace, democracy and prosperity. The combined skills, capabilities and knowledge of the 25 EU member states can be a powerful force to extend those values in today's world. For the security and well-being of our own citizens and of all our neighbours and partners, this Government will work to ensure that it remains so.

1.39 pm

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): The exchanges in the debate so far suggest that there is a deep and perhaps unbridgeable divide on the topic of the EU. Those of us with longer memories will recall that a similar philosophical divide in respect of the EU existed in 1983. However, in those days the roles were reversed. Of course, it was the Conservative Government of the time who were defending Europe, and it was the Labour Opposition of the time who had in their manifesto for the election that year a proposal to withdraw from both Europe and NATO. I remind the House of that to point out that over time some parties have found it necessary or desirable to change their positions.

Mr. Davidson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has pointed out that both the Government and Opposition have held different opinions at different times, unlike the Liberal Democrats who manage to hold different opinions at the same time. Does he agree with the Liberal Democrat leader in the European Parliament that the rebate should be scrapped? If not, is not that another example of the Liberal Democrats saying one thing in the European Parliament and another in the House of Commons?

Sir Menzies Campbell: Well, the hon. Gentleman has missed a career in the music hall. When it comes to the behaviour of Members of the European Parliament, he will of course recall that Labour MEPs recently voted against the Government's line on the working time directive. That demonstrates a degree of independence that the hon. Gentleman may wish to applaud.

Our position on the rebate has been set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on many occasions. We take a firm and unequivocal view that the Government are right in their attitude to the rebate. It is not negotiable. The position outlined by the Minister is the position that should be taken by the Government, and we will support it. The leader of the Liberal Democrats in the European Parliament is entitled to his opinion, but on this occasion he will have to accept that it has not been persuasive. Perhaps it would blunt the hon. Gentleman's ardour if he were immediately promoted to the Whip's Office, where he might find a ready opportunity for a better display of his talent.

In the aftermath of the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and Holland, it is important to resist—as the Minister did—the temptation to neglect the value of Europe. That is why I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the European Union had been instrumental in promoting peace, stability, democracy and human rights across Europe. Alongside NATO, the EU has strengthened our security and, through the free market, has been the foundation of our economic prosperity. In an era of globalisation, states have no option but to co-operate in tackling the challenges that globalisation brings, such as cross-border crime, terrorism, weapons proliferation, the environment and climate change. Isolation, or a failure to co-operate, would undermine, not enhance, our national sovereignty, endanger our economic strength, undermine our security and diminish our influence. The best way in which to achieve our objectives is through the European Union. Others may take the view that a less formal arrangement would be more appropriate and effective, but

that is a question of the philosophical divide that I mentioned earlier. I believe firmly and unequivocally that it is in the interests of us all to make the European Union work, and work effectively.

Dr. Fox: If the prosperity in Europe as a whole is a result of the free market operating through the European Union, to what does the right hon. and learned Gentleman attribute the structural unemployment in France and Germany?

Sir Menzies Campbell: Those are structural problems that require German and French solutions. It cannot be said, as is sometimes claimed, that it is membership of the single currency that has been responsible for those difficulties because other countries, such as Finland and Ireland, have achieved on average a higher rate of growth annually since they joined the euro. The German and French Governments have so far found it difficult to address those structural problems. Mr. Schröder has made some efforts to do so, but they have not been particularly successful, and the recent results in North Rhine-Westphalia suggest that they have been politically unpopular, to say the least.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that Germany and France need to enact their own reforms if they want to solve those problems. However, part of the problem has been being in a single currency zone with a single interest rate. It has been impossible for the European Central Bank to set an interest rate that is appropriate for all of the members. The euro interest rates are far too high for the German economy, but too low for the Italian and Spanish economies.

Sir Menzies Campbell: The advantages of a single currency throughout a single market outweigh any potential difficulties of the kind that the hon. Gentleman describes. If we are to have a single market, it will be at its most effective when it has a single currency.

Mr. Davidson: So we should join now?

Sir Menzies Campbell: Well, we have always said that it is in the long-term interests of the United Kingdom to be a member of the single currency, but that we should not join unless and until the economic conditions were correct. We have all had some experience of that because the Conservatives took us into the exchange rate mechanism at a rate that was inadequate—

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) (Con): And we came out of it.

Sir Menzies Campbell: Well, I am not sure that we had much choice about coming out. We chose to go in, but we came out under the pressure of events, not least an afternoon during which interest rates rose to 15 per cent. Joining the single currency in circumstances in which the economic conditions were not propitious would not be to our advantage, but in the long term, the advantages would be considerable.

We should resist the temptation to interpret too closely the reasons for the votes in Holland and France. At least, we should show some restraint in our interpretation. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said that the voters were voting against an elitist Europe. He should be careful about general propositions like that, because the corollary might be argued against him—that those who voted for ratification were voting in favour of an elitist Europe—and I do not believe that to be the case. We have to accept the fact of the votes and their consequences. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the constitution cannot be revived, and we have to accept that the problems that it was designed to address remain. Some solution will be necessary to those problems. However, as I said earlier this week in the House, to hold a referendum on a treaty that cannot come into force would be quixotic at best and, to the public, it might appear an act in the political theatre of the absurd. The British people would be bound to question the circumstances in which such a referendum were promoted.

While we appreciate that the Government have to walk a tightrope on the issue, not least because Britain will assume the presidency of the EU after 1 July, the rest of us need not be subject to the same inhibition. The truth is that when countries such as France, which has been part of the engine room of the EU, and Holland, which has been one of the most European of the members of first the European Coal and Steel Community, then the European Economic Community and now the European Union, reject the treaty, it represents a profound event of which account has to be taken. The question we have to ask is how long we can run an institution of 25, or 27 if we accept the accession of Romania and Bulgaria—legislation for that purpose is foreshadowed in the Queen's Speech, so we shall come back to those issues whether we like it or not—on an organisational structure designed in the first instance for six.

It would be absurd to claim that the treaty is all bad. There are non-controversial proposals that are in our national interest and would have widespread European support. That is why I was attracted by the notion that the proceedings of the Council of Ministers should be made much more transparent, and that they should cast their votes as well as conduct their deliberations in public so that people can see exactly what individual countries have voted for. Likewise the creation of what was described as an amber light for national Parliaments in relation to EU legislation seems an entirely sensible proposal and one that could, I understand, be enacted without the need for legislation or for a compulsory referendum if something of a legislative nature was proposed.

I make one point as an example of the need to recognise the fact that 27 cannot be run in the same way as six. At present, each country is entitled to a commissioner. Each country that joins will be entitled to a commissioner, so once Romania and Bulgaria have acceded there will be an entitlement to 27 commissioners. That makes no sense whatever. There is every argument for saying that the Commission should be reduced in size, not least to deal with legitimate arguments, some of which have been made today, about the need to deal with burgeoning bureaucracy.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has listed several things that would not need treaty

[Chris Bryant]

change but he has just listed one that would need such a change—perhaps he is about to set out a couple of others. There might be an argument that such measures should be included in the accession treaties for Romania and Bulgaria. Does he agree that that would be a suitable way forward?

Sir Menzies Campbell: There is much force in the view that we should not seek to bring about by the back door changes that the failure of the constitution to continue to have political life would prevent. People would have some sense of resentment if they thought that there was some kind of manipulation. In due course, there will have to be some form of treaty change to deal with the differing circumstances of six and 27. I used the illustration of the number of commissioners merely as an indication of where treaty change would be of great value and importance, not least to deal with the question of burgeoning bureaucracy to which reference has already been made.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman has pointed out that the EU is very different from when it was founded. Does he agree that it is also very different from when the UK joined? As the British people have never had a say about the current European Union would he welcome a referendum on our continued membership of it, given the benefits that he has just listed? Is he in favour of giving people a referendum on our continued membership of the current EU?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I know that it is advised that Latin be used sparingly in the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I cannot help saying, quot homines, tot sententiae. It seems that there are a variety of opinions on the Opposition Benches about just how far we should proceed. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I should answer the question with more enthusiasm—

Mr. Davidson: In English.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I shall do my best for the hon. Gentleman.

I should answer the question with more enthusiasm if more Conservative Members than the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash)—if my memory serves me right—had joined Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches, as well as some Labour Members, in supporting new clause 51 in the Committee on the Maastricht treaty legislation, which called for a referendum on that treaty. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) may be surprised to learn that the Government of the day whipped against that proposal and as a result no such referendum was held. I do not think that it is necessary to hold a referendum for the purpose he described, but if there is to be any change in the relationship between Brussels and London there should be a referendum. That is why the former leader of my party, now Lord Ashdown, was the first leader of a national party to call for a referendum in the event that a decision was taken that Britain should join the single European currency.

John Bercow: As a matter of record I argued for a referendum on the Maastricht treaty as long ago as 22 October 1992, in front of the Twickenham Conservative women's constituency committee conference. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is being uncharacteristically unfair to my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) whose position, as I understand it, is rightly that there should be a referendum if the Government propose to go ahead with a constitution that adds to the legislative competence of the European Union. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman is arguing that the subsidiarity and proportionality protocol contained in the draft constitutional treaty should be adopted, and can be adopted, without a referendum, many of us on both sides of the House would celebrate that because it is a deregulatory and not a centralising phenomenon.

Sir Menzies Campbell: If I may say so, even in the hon. Gentleman's days before the Twickenham ladies' Conservative club, I always suspected him of being a closet Liberal and he may have just demonstrated that. If he is saying that the parts of the proposed constitutional treaty that have a deregulatory effect, or indeed that give substance to the principle of subsidiarity, might be adopted without the need for a referendum I think that he will find a ready audience for that proposition on the Treasury Bench, as indeed the Minister is indicating. As I said earlier, quot homines, tot sententiae.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The first referendum call was on 28 February 1992 when I moved my Referendum Bill. I sought and obtained the support of the then leader of the Liberal Democrat party. It was the last measure on which Lady Thatcher voted in this Chamber. It predates all the Liberal Democrat claims that it was the only party that called for a referendum on Maastricht. The motion was debated by the House and there was a vote.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I have never claimed exclusivity in the matter. All I was saying was that some of us were arguing for a referendum on Maastricht when the formal position of the party of which the hon. Gentleman is a member—although it is not necessarily a formal position that he frequently supports—was in the opposite direction.

The notion that there is some unbridgeable ideological split between Anglo-Saxon liberal economics on the one hand and some Gallic social model on the other is entirely false. It is right to argue that we cannot abandon the values on which the European social model was founded—a model that is against exclusion and discrimination, that defends civil liberties and human rights and seeks to promote social justice—but in the globalised economy that model cannot be sustained without reform. There must be political reform to achieve greater accountability and transparency, some of which we have already discussed this afternoon, and economic reform to increase flexibility and productivity. Those two channels of reform must march robustly side by side.

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman saying that the Government are correct in their commitment to pursuing the Lisbon agenda?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I was about to come to that. So far, the Lisbon agenda has not received the strength of support and implementation that is required. As I have said in the House on many occasions, we must do much more to achieve the objectives of the Lisbon agenda.

The position of France and Germany has already been mentioned in the course of the debate and, as I have said, I believe that these are difficulties primarily of a structural kind. But we must be careful about offering ourselves as some paradigm of economic virtue and seek not, in some condescending way, to suggest to other countries in the European Union that we have found the perfect way forward.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Lisbon agenda. We should certainly seek to encourage productivity, enhance labour market flexibility and create a genuine free market in goods, persons, capital and, as has been observed, services. And we should seek to deregulate wherever possible—of that there is no doubt. But we should also have a rigorous approach here in London, because very often the argument is not that the original regulation from Brussels was particularly difficult or austere in its terms, but that by the time it had been through the machinery of government here it had become gold-plated, to the point where something that sought to create a common standard across the European Union was being implemented much more rigorously here in the United Kingdom, to the detriment of those whose businesses were affected by it.

I want to claim that the recent round of enlargement has been an enormous success. The ability to spread stability, democracy and economic opportunity to a wider region of Europe has been a tremendous thing for the continent. I hope that the demise of the constitution will not put an end to the accession negotiations with Turkey, or derail membership talks with other Balkan states such as Croatia. I hope too that we shall promote the forthcoming accession of Romania and Bulgaria with enthusiasm—provided, of course, that they meet the Copenhagen criteria in full.

But without doubt, in the changed circumstances since the referendums in Holland and France we must look again at the engagement of the people of Europe with the European Union. We need to start here first, not lecturing others but re-engaging the interest and awareness of the British people by ensuring that European issues are more frequently and more publicly brought into the national political debate. I do not think that any of us can be satisfied with the way in which we scrutinise European legislation in this place, and I do not exempt myself or my party from that criticism. We should find methods of ensuring that national Parliaments have a much greater role in the European legislative process and devote much more of their time to consideration of European legislative proposals. That is much more likely to stimulate active and wide-ranging political debate at a domestic level and bring about the sort of debate that the hon. Member for Woodspring was arguing for a little while ago. I see that as an obligation not just upon Government but upon Members of Parliament.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman about the role of national Parliaments, but why did not the Liberal representative on the Convention on the Future of Europe advance these propositions then? Why did he not join us in insisting that when national Parliaments said no to something on grounds of subsidiarity, that should be the end of the draft directive? It is all very well for him now to say that all these things are highly desirable; that was not what the Liberal Democrats were saying during the Convention process. Will he, on behalf of his party, admit that he made a mistake then and perhaps even go so far as to make an apology?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I have not heard too many apologies this afternoon; I am not sure that I should be the first. I must say to the right hon. Gentleman—for whom I have a great admiration, not least for the intellectual consistency and integrity of his position although I do not agree with it—that I am not sure that at this particular stage in these matters we advance the case or help the argument by going over what is essentially old, cold ground. What is important is, as has been said, that this is an opportunity as well as a reverse, and if it is an opportunity we must take it in perhaps a rather more positive spirit than his question might necessarily have suggested.

Let me deal with the question of subsidiarity, because this is an opportunity of the kind that I have described to consolidate that principle, and to ensure that it is properly applied. I have long toyed with the idea that the House, for example, might establish something approaching a subsidiarity audit, so that on an annual basis there was a report to the House, demonstrating the extent to which the principle had been properly followed and highlighting circumstances in which, in the opinion of the auditor responsible for producing the report, there had been a failure to apply the principle properly. We need a number of checks and balances. That would not require legislation, nor do I suspect that it would require a referendum. It is true, and one has to accept it, that in a number of areas there has been an incremental accretion of European Union powers without proper consideration of whether or not that is desirable.

I want to return to the question of enlargement because it is of such fundamental importance. In recent history, eight of the new members of the European Union were Soviet satellites and, as the hon. Member for Woodspring hinted, three of the older members—Spain, Portugal and Greece—were governed by dictatorships. The citizens of all member states, including the United Kingdom, have benefited from the resulting spread of democracy, the stability that that has brought about and the prosperity underpinned by membership of what is now the largest internal market in the world, consisting of some 450 million people. More than half of our trade is with European Union states, to whom we export three times as much as we do to the United States, and that trade supports some 3 million British jobs.

The European Union is unique globally as an alliance of states that has consistently and effectively extended democracy and has made part of its objective the bringing of stability and human rights to hundreds of millions of people, some of whom—I know that memories on these matters can be short—lived under Nazism and then under communism. If one visits any of these places, as I am sure Members of the House of all parties have done in recent times, one cannot help but be

[Sir Menzies Campbell]

affected by the sense of release that these countries feel and their commitment to both NATO and the European Union.

It is said that a new generation does not recognise the enormous achievement that the European Coal and Steel Community began, which has been continued by the EEC and the EU—the prevention of continental war in Europe. We should not avoid an opportunity to remind a younger generation of the extent of that achievement. We can illustrate its contemporary relevance by pointing to what has happened in the past 15 years in the Balkans—now, at least for the moment, quiet, although not necessarily always in some parts. I do not believe that the outpouring of nationalist, ethnic and religious hatreds that we saw in that region would have been anything other than inhibited if the members of the countries there now represented had been members of NATO and members of the European Union as well. That is one of the enormous advantages that the European Union has brought and we should never be slow to point out that advantage to those who are sceptical.

I also say this. I do not seek to set up the European Union as a strategic rival to the United States, but our strong defence of the rule of law, and our commitment to human rights and multilateral action, provides an important counterbalance to the current doctrines and strategies of the present American Administration. As an illustration of that I point to the fact of the negotiations with Iran on nuclear non-proliferation—something which the United States, for a variety of doctrinal and other reasons, simply would not have been willing or able to engage in. The United Kingdom will be much better placed to influence America and other powerful states if we are at the heart of Europe, and a Europe with a clear and coherent foreign policy.

John Bercow: I respect the sincerity and integrity of what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just said, but I put it to him that he ought not to overstate the case of the European Union as a counter-weight, or even in some cases of trade and foreign policy a preferable alternative, to the United States. Would he not care to reflect, as he has many times in a different context, on the inappropriateness of the European Union lifting the arms embargo on China, and on the truly pitiful inadequacy of the current EU sanctions regime towards Burma? Those are two issues about which I know he has long been concerned; the American position is greatly superior to that of the European Union.

Sir Menzies Campbell: In some respects, Congress rather than the Administration has sometimes been responsible, but I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the proposal—it appears to have run into the long grass somewhere, and let us hope that it stays there—that the EU embargo in relation to China should be raised. It should be remembered that it was imposed after Tiananmen square, on which there has never been full disclosure. I understand that some of those who were imprisoned at the time languish there still, despite the passage of time.

I do not for a moment overstate the European Union's capacity to achieve common foreign policy. Common foreign policy requires unanimity—which we may debate on another occasion—which necessarily inhibits its ability to proceed as far as the hon. Gentleman and I might like it to. I do, however, believe in strong defence of the rule of law, support for human rights and the importance of multilateralism. There is a sense in which the Americans have the battalions and do not need multilateralism. We do not have the battalions—I wish that we did—and therefore we do need it. That, I think, is an important doctrine and an important foreign policy position, and I hope that the European Union will continue to espouse it.

I believe that Europe needs a period of stability. We have been in what could be described as an almost Maoist permanent cultural revolution, experiencing treaty upon treaty. There ought, in truth, to have been sufficient flexibility in the institutions of the European Union to accommodate first enlargement, and then the arrangements necessary for a union that has swelled from six to 27 member states.

There have been crises in Europe before, and Europe has always survived them. Sometimes they have been personality-based, but on this occasion it should be recognised that the difficulties are more profound. The events of the past 10 days cannot be ignored, but nor, I believe, are they as apocalyptic as some would claim and—it would appear, at least—some would hope.

2.12 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be the first Englishman, indeed the first Yorkshireman, to intervene in what has so far been an argument among Scots about the relationship between Great Britain and Europe. It is, however, difficult to maintain the air of elegiac sadness maintained by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) throughout his speech over what has happened in Europe. I see it more as a comic situation: the well-fed and well-oiled ruminations of Giscard d'Estaing and selected members of the European elite have turned into the John Cleese dead parrot sketch. Although we do not say as much in the House—apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who did so on Monday—it is clear that the parrot is dead, snuffed it, passed on, gone into another land, tod, mort, no longer with us. That means that Eurosceptics like me will be deprived of months of fun and happiness in opposing the European constitution—successfully, at the end of the day. I regret that. At last, for that period at least, I would have had a useful role in politics. Meanwhile, my right hon. Friends will be deprived of months of straining their acting ability, pretending to be enthusiastic about something that they did not particularly want in the first place. A certain amount of clarity in politics has been achieved.

What will we have instead of all that? Well, we may have more debates on the post mortem than we were scheduled to have on the constitution itself. We began debating the Bill before the end of the last Parliament. It now seems that we shall be talking more about the constitution now that it is dead than we were when it was living. Certainly there will be weeks of hypocrisy, and there will clearly be a ganging-up on the United Kingdom, particularly over the rebate—as if we were responsible for the noes in France and Holland. Many crocodile tears will be shed by all parties, here and in Europe. There will be a prolonged attempt to postpone

the funeral of the parrot, until the smell becomes overwhelming. I imagine that it will be carted around Europe, being given a lengthy state funeral—something unique for parrots. The corpse may well be interrogated on what it wants and what its intentions are. We may even see a post-mortem cutting up of the corpse to see which bits can be preserved: the beak, the wings, the feathers? Which bits of the plumage can be preserved? Will the dead bird itself be forgotten? I am not entirely sure, but there will clearly be weeks of that kind of activity.

Angela Browning: Could we not just stuff it?

Mr. Mitchell: Common sense suggests it, but I cannot whip up that degree of enthusiasm for the thing.

Clearly the parrot is dead, although the Government cannot say so. Not only is it dead, however; it was the euro that killed it. There have been two consistent efforts in Europe to achieve the goal of ever closer union that was in the treaty of Rome and has been maintained since then. The first has gone down the constitutional track, constantly strengthening the centre as the European constitution did, turning this assembly of states into a state in its own right with its own foreign policy, its own army, its own economy, its own law, its own rights. The aim has been to build a state over the states. Then there is the economic track, or rather the monetary union track. Monetary union would provide a European economy, a European bank and the institutions to run that European economy and European bank. It would strengthen the institutions at the centre and the impulsion towards unity.

Unfortunately, it was that second track that produced the disaster. It involved taking what is essentially, and can only be, an economic instrument, an instrument of management—interest rates and the exchange rate, the only crucial weapons to manage the economy that are left to us—and using it for a political purpose, that of building ever closer union. Such a distortion produces damaging economic consequences.

The trend towards monetary union began with the snake, which failed. It was then revived with the exchange rate mechanism between 1978 and 1979—the Labour Government wisely stayed out of that—and the union was consummated with the euro itself. We hoped, when we entered Europe in 1972, to hitch ourselves to an institution with a rapid rate of growth so that our own economy would grow rapidly. Those growth rates stopped, however, when the entire EU went down the path of monetary union. What ended was economic growth; what came was high unemployment. Both were consequences of the use of the exchange rate and interest rates as a political instrument to build union.

Why? First, it is clear that one interest rate could not fit all. It could not possibly cope with the economic situation in Germany and that in Ireland at the same time. Secondly, it is clear that a nation state must use and retain its instruments of management if it is to manage the economy for its purposes, and offset any damaging consequences to the economy. It needs its weapons of management, and its own independent economy. Without those, there will be a deterioration. Thirdly, it is clear that the regime is deflationary, as exemplified by the growth and stability pact. The pact was, in fact, the most anti-Keynesian measure ever seen. It proposed savage cuts in Government spending. Deflationary measures imposed by monetary union were driving up unemployment, thus increasing public spending, reducing the inflow of taxes and therefore increasing deficits.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend is saying. Does he not think that it is even madder that the countries with high unemployment have been urged to cut their spending and deflate even further, making an even worse problem?

Mr. Mitchell: It is simply madness, and it goes against anything that is sensible in economics. We in this country have been inoculated against the dangers of managing the economy to maintain the exchange rate. Things should be the other way round: the exchange rate must be used and adjusted for the purposes of the economy. Failures in this country caused by such an attempt to maintain a fixed exchange rate at all costs should have inoculated us against any enthusiasm, interest or involvement in either the exchange rate mechanism or the euro. We have enough examples of the damage that that has done.

Fortunately, those examples have convinced the Chancellor of the Exchequer to control our Prime Minister's naive enthusiasm for making a political commitment by joining the euro. We are all very grateful for that because the country has benefited, but for France and Germany the consequence of that trend towards monetary union was that that their economies slowed drastically. They are the European economy's driving motors, but both slowed down: growth was much lower and unemployment was much higher, hovering between 10 and 12 per cent., with disastrous consequences.

The euro created the depressed economic situation that lies at the heart of Europe. In fact, the euro turned Europe into the high-unemployment, low-growth blackspot of the advanced world—the worst example of failure. Even Margaret Thatcher's Britain did better in growth terms, for reasons that I will come to in a minute, and it is that climate that produced no votes in France and Holland. "It's the economy, stupid," one has to say.

Clearly, Spain was going to vote for the European constitution to keep the money flowing because it has benefited substantially; it is laughing all the way to bank. But, equally clearly, those countries where the people have a say in a referendum and where the euro has done economic damage—Holland and France so far; there are others to come—will vote against the constitution in such circumstances.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making a very strong point. Overall, during the Thatcherite period, growth in Britain was rather higher than in the eurozone. Does he accept that that growth was built on a big depreciation of the currency of about 35 per cent. during Nigel Lawson's term as Chancellor?

Mr. Mitchell: My hon. Friend anticipates a point that I was coming to 16 pages on, but I am grateful to him none the less because it is crucial.

Chris Bryant: Can we skip those 16 pages?

Mr. Mitchell: Well, there is more excitement to come, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be keen to wait for it.

My conclusion on the twin-track approach in which the monetary union track has done such damage to the constitutional track is, "It's the euro wot done it," as *The Sun* might put it, and there is no point in dredging around for further explanation. The question for the House and for Europe is: what happens now? There have been attempts—particularly in Europe, but also by some of our Euro-enthusiastic friends in this country—to look at the vote and say that people were not really voting on the constitution; they were voting against Chirac or against unemployment, or whatever.

We are having séances to interrogate the parrot—there is a lot of excuse making—but we cannot pick and choose with an electoral verdict: no means no, means nein, means nee, and that is it, frankly. I appreciate that the Government cannot say that as openly as we Back Benchers can say it. They have to hang back, dressed in black, looking sombre and serious, perhaps with a few tears added for special effect. They must say nothing, and let the fact of death emerge in Europe. That will certainly complicate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's presidency of the European Union—it will make it very difficult.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe listed a quite exciting prospectus for Europe, including fighting poverty in Africa and getting rid of the common agricultural policy. I wish that he had added the common fisheries policy as well, and I certainly wish that its impact was diminished. That agenda is very attractive and important, but it will be difficult for this country to do anything about it, given that the other member states will object to British leadership because that is the only policy left to them. That will make getting anything done in Europe stickier, more difficult and harder during our presidency. In any case, it will make it difficult to lead members of the European Union in a wholly new direction.

It is sad therefore that added to the attractive list of things that need to be done that my right hon. Friend outlined is so-called reform—this is our central proposition—which amounts to liberalisation, rolling back the state, cutting public spending, cutting welfare provision and weakening the power of labour and the unions. That is laughingly referred to as freeing up labour markets or deregulating them. It amounts to a Thatcherite programme so flagrant that the Europeans could well erect a Thatcher statue next to the pissing boy in Brussels, which we could look on with a certain feeling of shock and concern. It is very much a Thatcherite programme. A Labour Government are urging Europe to get rid of its social programme just as that social programme has been diluted in the Labour party. That is not the answer to Europe's problems. That kind of Thatcherite, monetarist programme—we call it a reform programme—is not what Europe wants and it is not what the electorate of France voted for. They voted against such a programme, which they regard as British.

That programme will not work. It did not even work in this country. That is where I come to the point interjected by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins). In the 1980s, the Thatcherite programme inflicted deep damage on our manufacturing sector, which was more severely harmed and reduced than that of any other country. That makes it very difficult for us to pay our way in the world, to provide jobs for people and to fight back against our current economic circumstances. There has been an expansion of the white-collar and consumer sectors, but the manufacturing base has been drastically eroded.

That programme also increases public spending because the more that we put people out of work to discipline the unions and to weaken the power of labour, the less tax comes in and the more goes out in benefits. Do we want that in Europe? Do we want to force that sort of programme on countries that already have a 12 per cent. rate of unemployment? It is ludicrous to suggest that the rest of Europe should go down that path.

The recovery in the 1980s came, as my hon. Friend suggested, when the value of the pound came down, precipitating the Lawson boom and stimulating the whole economy. That performance was repeated—Conservative Governments repeat themselves in this fashion—in the early 1990s, when deflation was made necessary by joining the ERM.

I was interested to hear the Liberals' view on the ERM, because I remember that, at the time, they were leading wild mobs down Whitehall, chanting the popular cry of "Move to the narrower bands now!" Now they tell us that we went into the ERM at an over-valued rate, but, back then, they wanted to make things even harder by tightening up the rate. That was the Liberal strategy in the 1990s. We escaped the disastrous consequences of all that only when we were forced out of the ERM, and the economy immediately began to recover.

Labour Members have every reason to be grateful to the Conservative Government who began that recovery by taking the decision to leave the ERM. That has certainly benefited Labour in power substantially, but it indicates that it is not deflation or reforms but a change in the exchange rate that produce recovery and expansion. The problem was effectively ended by devaluation, as was the Thatcher period. That was what stimulated the economy, and it is what Europe needs, given its current situation. An expansion of demand is the only way out of the trap.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Does he agree that each member state needs to find its own way forward with the depreciation of its currency, if it has one, to an appropriate level? Some countries' currencies might need to depreciate, but not the whole eurozone. Countries should develop their own national currencies again at an appropriate value.

Mr. Mitchell: That is absolutely true. The key to German recovery would be extremely low, or even negative, interest rates and a much lower exchange rate, but that is exactly what it cannot have. Continuously trying to cut costs, labour, investment and public spending is no way to achieve competitiveness. Such measures take years to improve competitiveness, or do not work. We cannot achieve competitiveness by driving European standards down to those of countries in the

far east and China, with which Europe competes. The value of the euro must come down substantially if an uncompetitive Europe is to become competitive, and although European interest rates are low, they must come down further.

It is important for that process to begin now. Given the scale of America's deficit, the dollar will fall because markets will bring it down. The funny money—the money flows—will thus transfer into the euro, which is what people desired in the first place when they said that they wanted another reserve currency that could look the dollar in the face. The euro would thus go up as the dollar came down because money would be flowing out of America and into Europe because people would fear a loss of investments.

That situation will be compounded if the European Central Bank continues on its present path because it is a banker's bank par excellence. It is a monetarist, high-exchange-rate bank that believes in building up surpluses, as the French always have. The obsession with an overvalued currency and surpluses is the legacy of Jacques Rueff, de Gaulle's adviser in the 1960s. The health of the European economy cannot be restored if that process goes on.

The bank is based on one target: inflation. It is not based on any other targets, such as full employment, the health of the economy and economic growth, which have successfully guided the Fed over the past few years. The ECB apparently has no concern for the exchange rate, which it regards as an unimportant residual. However, there will be no future for the European economy unless the exchange and interest rates come down. Until that happens the damage will continue, so reform, modernisation and all other agendas put forward will not be acceptable to electorates until demand is expanded and the currency comes down. The flight of jobs, investment and production to the far east will go on if the current situation continues.

Those who hold out Europe as a shining ideal are over-enthusiastic. They exaggerate Europe's prospects and their enthusiasm for it leads them to accept anything coming from Europe as a good thing, whether that is the rotten, monstrous and awful constitution, monetary union or the ERM. However, those people will have to face the fact that Europe is degenerating in an unstoppable way towards a relegated area and a zone characterised by high unemployment and defensive decline, which will offer no future for our people or theirs.

2.34 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): As I stood in the Place de la Bastille and the Place de la République a few days ago and heard the results as they came through, I was bound to reflect on the fact that there had been an historic change. The Chamber is not entirely full—on the other side of the House to say the least—for a debate that is a reflection on a new French revolution. There has been a massive change with the rejection of a concept and project that has developed since the second world war, and even before.

I was also bound to consider at that moment that our party could have made Europe a central issue during the election campaign. An opinion poll commissioned by the European Foundation immediately after the general election showed that 55 per cent. of people in this country, and 62 per cent. of 18 to 24-year-olds, thought that Europe should have been a central issue in the election campaign. That ICM poll surveyed people across the board from all parties. If we had treated Europe as a central issue, I think that we would have got close to winning the election, or even have had the opportunity to win it, given that we are in the wake of an historic vote in France.

We are debating the most fundamental question facing the people of this country, as we have said in many debates over the past 20 years. The fundamental question that was before the people of France and Holland was about who governs them. We heard much about the fact that the vote in France was a rejection of President Chirac, but the people were really rejecting the policies that President Chirac was following on the economic and political structure that he had agreed through his relationship with the European Union. The historic rejection was, in truth, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) said, a rejection of the high unemployment and low growth that were the inevitable consequence of following those policies. That is the true lesson, as I tried to indicate while the results were coming through.

The Maastricht treaty is history now, but there are elements of this debate that relate to questions raised at that time. It is not necessary for us to say who got there first or to bring up those of us who were part and parcel of the referendum campaigns. Many Conservative Members fought strongly against the Whip and the conventional wisdom of the time for a referendum because we believed that the matter was so fundamentally important that it could not be left to the party Whips. We said that the treaty would ultimately lead to a constitution, as indeed it did, and we wrote about that at the time. We took a stand, and the best that we can say about it now is that we were not entirely proved wrong.

The most important thing now is to look to the future and regard the historic change as an opportunity. It is an opportunity for not only the United Kingdom and this Parliament, but Europe as a whole. Our only problem is that the language coming out of Europe from Mr. Juncker, Mr. de Villepin, President Chirac and Mr. Schröder is third rate. They do not seem to have been able to take on board the fact that the elite of Europe has been rejected. The arguments that they put forward, which accumulated over time, have been rejected by the people of Europe. There is no serious doubt that if there were an attempt to resurrect what has now been called the dead Euro-parrot by having a second vote in either France or Holland, there would be an even bigger vote against it. Can they not listen and realise what is going on? There is an absolute arrogant refusal to believe that what they constructed—the European project—is dead in the water. That is not to say that we have not got an important job to do in trying to find the elements of the way forward, but massive unemployment and low growth have led to the overwhelming rejection of the constitution.

The origins of the European Union—I hope that this is a constructive view—lie in the League of Nations. In the 1920s, on seeing the catastrophic holocaust of the first world war, Monsieur Briand, who worked with

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Jean Monnet, resolved that he would try to prevent anything like that from happening again. Nobody can dispute that that was an honourable motive.

Let us consider the second world war. My father was killed 61 years ago in Normandy. The plain fact is that those of us who suffered, if I can put it that way, from that sacrifice by those young boys have to accept that there was an understandable reason why, in the aftermath of the second world war, people like Sir Edward Heath and other distinguished members of Conservative Cabinets over 20 years, who themselves had been part and parcel of that war, thought that the idea of a European union was the way forward.

Kelvin Hopkins: I am listening with interest. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the second world war grew out of the economic collapse of Germany, particularly in the 1920s, and the subsequent rise of Nazism? Had we got the economics rights in the interwar era, we may not have had that war.

Mr. Cash: That is possible, but the point that we reached in 1945, with Jean Monnet and the Schuman plan that followed in 1951, was an attempt to prevent such a war from happening again. People sought a stable solution to a chaotic and dreadful holocaust. The problem was that, however understandable it may have been, in reality they embarked on a process that was essentially undemocratic. They thought, almost in despair, of the democratic process. They remembered the Weimar Republic and what that led to in the shape of Nazism and Hitler. They thought that there was another way of dealing with the problem, but essentially their message and philosophy were wrong. That was where the problem lay, however understandable it may have been at the time.

Then there were discussions between de Gaulle and Adenauer. I read an interesting observation in de Gaulle's memoirs when he said that they spent a long time discussing the future of Europe and both agreed that neither would allow their respective countries to become merged in a stateless institution. That was an understanding between them.

We know de Gaulle's position: he was in favour was a Europe of nations. We also know that Churchill spoke about a kind of federal Europe, but he was not talking about the kind of Europe that is represented by the constitution rejected in France and the Netherlands. He spoke about our being associated but not absorbed. In other words, there was an appreciation by those people in the 1940s and 1950s of the dangers of going down that undemocratic technocratic route. They were not going to allow, so far as they could, the situation to develop along the lines of the technocrats, as expressed by Monnet and Schuman.

Furthermore, a remarkable book—Erich Fromm's "The Fear of Freedom"—got close to the heart of the problem faced by the current monolithic creature that was created in the aftermath of that period. An inability and a despair—a refusal—led people to think that they could not have freedom and that they must be constrained by the new institutional arrangement because it would make them more secure. In fact, the opposite was true.

We heard reference to historical inevitability. The communists and fascists believed in that. I have even heard some members of my party talking about it. The reality is, however, that nothing has been clearer, in terms of the history of Europe over the past centuries, than the fact that the nation state has been the glory of Europe. Whether it is music and the great principalities that gave rise to Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Handel and so forth, or whether it is the great painters of Venice, Florence or, wherever, the competition that existed between those principalities and those states gave rise to the flowering of the renaissance and the subsequent development of the great glories of European culture. That is what has been lost as the stateless institutions have impinged on the culture of Europe as a whole.

Again, in the institutional sense, let us consider the attempts to create empires throughout Europe. The Roman empire foundered—of course it did—as, indeed, did the empires of Charlemagne and Charles V, and the attempts by Henry of Navarre in the early 17th century and those by Napoleon, Hitler and others. The fact is that attempts to bring together this vibrant diverse collection of nation states, which co-operate and work in association with one other in the modern day, can produce results that are beneficial, not only to this country, but to Europe as a whole.

Mr. David: I am reluctant to become embroiled in the hon. Gentleman's historical discourse, but does he accept that nation states, as currently defined, are a distinct product of a period of history—namely, the 19th century?

Mr. Cash: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman refers to the treaty of Westphalia. To carry on with the historical analogy, 1648 is defined as the year of the nation state. The fact remains that since then we have had terrible problems of nationalism, which is different from a proper appreciation of an association of democratic nation states. No democratic nation state has ever gone to war with another democratic nation state. That is the truth. Yes, nationalism is wrong, but not the idea of a democratic nation state.

Indeed, I would go further and say that the problem that lies at the heart of the way in which the European project has gone wrong is the essence of double-speak, which has also undermined people's ability to believe in the project. In George Orwell's "1984", there are references to the Ministry of Truth, where freedom is slavery and the words are inverted in just the same way as we find in the European Union. It is strange that that should have been done. There was a deliberate determination, running against the realities, to use expressions that had the opposite meaning. For example, subsidiarity really means centralisation and primacy. Not once has the principle of subsidiarity been applied. I have asked repeatedly in the House for one example of subsidiarity in action, but it has not happened.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have had a single empire in Europe, the Roman empire, a single currency, gold, and a single language, Latin; that we now have a Europe that is in danger of going the "dominus et deus" route or even the

dictatorship route; and that if Europe continues in the direction adopted by its present political elite, they might end up going the same way as the Roman elite?

Mr. Cash: There is a great deal of truth in that. The refusal by the elite to accept the inevitable consequence of the rejection of the constitution by the people in referendums in their own countries indicates their failure to appreciate the democratic requirements of a modern state.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cash: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

Price stability was embedded in the Maastricht criteria, yet there has been no price stability. That is why, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby made clear, the whole concept of the central bank does not work. The result is high unemployment, as my old friend Peter Shore and I argued during the debates on the subject.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that unemployment in the euro area has fallen by 10 per cent. since the launch of the single currency, and will he revise his views in the light of that fact?

Mr. Cash: He certainly will not. *[Laughter.]* I will go further and say that the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have had the pleasure of debating on other occasions, should reflect on the results of the French referendum in the light of high unemployment in that country—at least 10 per cent. but actually much higher. Unemployment in Germany is running at 12 per cent. and more—higher than in the time of Adolf Hitler. Perhaps it is he who should change his position, not I.

Chris Huhne *rose—*

Mr. Cash: I have had many debates with the hon. Gentleman in the past and will do so in the future, but I shall not have a running debate with him this afternoon.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman have one with me?

Mr. Cash: I ought to give way to the hon. Gentleman, even though he is fully clothed this afternoon.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman might like to reflect on whether to make comments of that nature in future. Those of his colleagues who have made such comments in the Chamber have chosen to apologise.

The hon. Gentleman makes some interesting points about subsidiarity, a concept whose origin lies in an encyclical of the Roman Catholic Church of 1881, I believe—if I am wrong he will correct me, I am sure. The Church expounded that no power should ever arrogate to itself the authority to make a decision that could more properly be made by a lower authority. Can he cite any example of the Roman Catholic Church abiding by that principle?

Mr. Cash: My remark was jocular and certainly not intended to cause offence. I withdraw it. As for the Catholic Church, as the hon. Gentleman knows, subsidiarity was—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I hesitate to intervene, but we are going rather wide of the motion.

Mr. Cash: I shall say only that subsidiarity was a theological concept, not applicable to questions relating to political institutions.

To return to the subject of double-speak, the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy have undermined farming and fishing. That is the problem. Attempts have been made to persuade us that there is a democratic rationale to the European Union. In reality, it is permeated by lack of accountability and lack of democracy. That is the real problem. When European politicians speak of reform, in fact they go further, into over-regulation. The Government and the House must grapple with the fact that if we want to make changes to improve regulation, we will have to do one of two things: either we will have to persuade all the other member states of our case—we have just seen what has happened in relation to the services directive and the working time directive; or, if we are determined to make the relevant changes, we will have to make legislation in this place that is expressly inconsistent with legislation already made in Europe. To do that—the Minister for Europe knows my Sovereignty of Parliament Bill and the principles that it enunciates very well—we shall also have to lay down a clear policy wherein it is stated that it is in the interests of the United Kingdom to make the changes in respect of any directive or regulation, then pass the legislation stating that we do so notwithstanding the European Communities Act 1972, and then require our judges to give effect to that inconsistent law. Otherwise, the result is all talk and no action. Reform cannot be achieved any other way, unless the right hon. Gentleman can tell us that we can get unanimity among all the member states on the reforms that he and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have proposed.

We have to make a decision. Are we just going to do what the European Union tells us to do—by majority voting, as often as not? Or are we going to defend our national interests and insist on doing so by using the powers of this place? It is we, through this House, who govern the United Kingdom. That is the key point. What is important is the electors and democracy. The right hon. Gentleman and the constitution must provide answers to those issues.

What is to be done? Remember that, as I told the Prime Minister some months ago, the constitutional treaty repealed all the existing treaties. We therefore have an opportunity. If the Government are prepared to sign up to a treaty that repeals all the existing treaties and imposes a law of primacy of the European constitution and the European Court of Justice, surely, in the light of the rejection of that treaty, the Government will now say simply, "We were prepared to repeal all the treaties, so let us do so and then go back to the drawing board." Let them heed another opinion poll commissioned by the European Foundation from ICM, in which people were asked whether they want

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associated status—a relationship with a Europe that is, in effect, the Common Market plus political co-operation. Some 68 per cent. of 18 to 24-year-olds said yes, as did 62 per cent. of most of the other grades and classes in the poll.

The Government have a real problem, which is why I believe it would have been sensible to make Europe the centrepiece of the general election. If we do as I suggest, we must bear in mind the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), in what is, by any standards, a significant shift away from what Front Benchers have been saying for many years. My hon. Friend even referred to the Single European Act in terms of considerable uncertainty.

Mr. David: I notice that the hon. Gentleman supports what the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said, but does he believe none the less that Britain should have associate membership, not full membership, of the European Union?

Mr. Cash: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) and I tabled a series of amendments to the European Scrutiny Committee report that appeared just before the general election—amendments to which the hon. Gentleman subscribed—and some of those called for associate status. It is all there on the record, so I do not need to repeat it today.

The real problem now is not the constitution itself. The constitution is dead. The real problem is the existing treaties. What has given rise to the over-regulation, the lack of democracy, the double-speak and the inability to produce policies—foreign policy and so on—for Europe that are constructive and stable? The short answer is that the whole project is filled with contradictions and riddled with double-speak. No wonder the people of Europe have looked at that failed project, with its high unemployment and low growth, and concluded that they cannot live with it any more. We must address the existing treaties, which have given rise to all these problems, to restore democracy in Europe and to the nation state and, irrespective of the Whip, to the House as well. The only thing that has driven all the failed attempts to get the issue straight since 1990, and since the Single European Act 1987, is that the whipping system has insisted that Members do what they are told, keep their mouths shut and carry on as if nothing has happened. As it happens, it did not happen, and it will not happen now. The fortunate truth is that truth has now prevailed. The movement towards examining the basis of the Single European Act onwards includes Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and the constitution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring said unequivocally, as far as I can recall, that we had to have a debate. I would prefer a decision. Now is the time when the British people—certainly from the Opposition Benches and those whom we represent—would expect us to be able to say that we want to have a Europe that is stable. We know that if Europe implodes as a result of the chaos that could come from the continuation of ridiculous policies and failed projects, there is more danger in the instability and the tension that could come from that than there is from having a good and settled discussion as we move forwards.

It will not be a matter only of debate. I wrote a pamphlet entitled "Associated but not Absorbed", in which I pointed out that other nation states, in my opinion, would tend to follow us if we took a lead. It is down to the Government to do that, but I do not think that they will. I am therefore heartened that it appears that we, the Opposition, are now re-evaluating many of the things which previously were regarded as off limits. We are listening and I believe that changes are about to occur, but I would like to see a decision. I would not like simply a debate. We need to go back to what is effectively the Common Market and, at the same time, political co-operation. It will be something that is perhaps a bit more than the Common Market but it will probably be less than the Single European Act.

Chris Huhne: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would explain the difference between his vision of associated status and the status that Norway currently enjoys with its relations with the EU. Perhaps he will remind us that those in Oslo call it the fax democracy. Directives arrive by fax from Brussels and are put into Norwegian law without any influence of Norwegian Ministers, the Council of Ministers and Norwegian MEPs. Does the hon. Gentleman regard that status as an increase in sovereignty?

Mr. Cash: The hon. Gentleman should know—I know that he does know—that the basis of Norway's status is in accordance with the European economic area. I do not agree with that. We need to go back further than that. Norway is confined within that area to commitments that have lead to the fax democracy. I do not want a fax democracy; I want the House to make decisions on its own terms in a manner that enables our democracy, and those who voted for us in the general election, to have a say as to how things are to happen. It is typical of the Liberal Democrats to come up with the rubbish that has just emerged from the hon. Gentleman.

Angela Browning: My hon. Friend will be aware that the EU has more than 60 bilateral trade and tariff agreements with other countries throughout the world, on favourable conditions, without single market regulation. I am sure that he is referring to that.

Mr. Cash: Indeed he is. I am grateful to my good and hon. Friend, who has fought many a battle on this subject over the years.

We are at a fundamental moment of change, which we must seize as an opportunity. There is nothing negative about trying to get Europe right; if we get Europe wrong, we get everything wrong. Given the impact of Europe, it is our duty as a party, as a nation and as a Parliament to remember that high unemployment and low growth are no remedies. Disconnecting the people is no remedy. Being undemocratic and unstable is no panacea for the European people or for this country.

We do not want a centralised and undemocratic state. We want to maintain the sovereignty of our Parliament on behalf of the people who elected us most recently. This is a moment of change. This is the time when we must decide, on behalf of the people who have elected us, that we will put up with this constitution no longer and will reverse the existing treaties that have led to chaos and disintegration in the European Union.

3.5 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is an enormous privilege and a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). I am particularly glad that he is a Member of this place. He has always been a fine Member in participating in these debates over the past few years. I am delighted that he is becoming such a prominent member of the Conservative party. His passionate belief that Europe should have been at the forefront of the general election campaign for the Conservative party reflects precisely the agenda that will probably keep the Conservative party on the Opposition Benches for many years to come. During the general election campaign, not one person talked to me about Europe on the streets. That is despite the fact that I have been fairly prominent as a pro-European within my constituency as well as in the House.

I note in passing that the Conservatives had at any one time 28 national billboards in the Rhonda constituency. I guess that it was a good use of resources since they secured 1,800 votes. They increased my majority and saw a 3 per cent. swing to Labour in the constituency. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will continue to play a significant part in the Conservative party. I hope that he returns to the Opposition Front Bench, a position which he occupied briefly, and that we hear a great deal more from him. Undoubtedly that will keep the Conservative party in the shadows.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is right that Europe was not an issue on the doorstep with Labour voters, because they knew well that Labour had promised them referendums on both the constitution and the euro, and that they were free to say no in those referendums.

Chris Bryant: There may be some truth in that. We should not be too ideological in this debate. I am not entirely convinced, as I often am not by my hon. Friend's arguments.

The hon. Member for Stone said that he believed that the votes in France and the Netherlands showed that the elites of Europe had been rejected. I do not understand that argument. It is clear that the French and the Dutch took a view on the constitutional treaty and on a range of other issues. I do not suppose that there will be a full analysis for many years. Whether the French people and the Dutch people were specifically taking a view on the elites of Europe, whoever they may or may not be, I do not know.

The hon. Gentleman spoke rather curiously—perhaps with a loose tongue—about the empires of Europe. He seemed to conceive of the EU as another empire in the model of Charlemagne or Napoleon. There is a substantial difference between an empire that is created by war and subjugation and co-operation between member states, which is precisely what the constitutional treaty was arguing for. That is an important distinction. I hope that he will not slip back to his conception of the EU when, I suspect, he returns to these issues in a future debate, or whenever he opens his mouth in the Chamber.

I know that I am meant to be profoundly depressed today. I am a pro-European and argued the case for the constitutional treaty. I argued for us not having a referendum and then I argued for us having a referendum when we decided that we were having a referendum. I know that because John Humphrys told me and the whole country that all pro-Europeans should now be very depressed. He said that Europe was in meltdown. He added that Italy would almost certainly leave the euro, with many senior politicians demanding that, saying that their country should abandon the euro and return to the lira.

I do not believe one part of what John Humphrys said in that context and I do not feel depressed. I accept that the French and Dutch voted against the draft constitutional treaty. That means that, at best, the treaty is on a life support system. I suspect that it will be shut down in the near future, but I do not accept that my entire pro-European argument is founded on this particular document. In principle, many of us believe that it is a good thing for Britain to play a role at the heart of Europe. It is our destiny to be an intrinsic part of Europe. We should not be on the sidelines like Norway nor should we be in the marginalia of European history, as the hon. Gentleman would argue.

It is important that we are at the heart of Europe, but that is not intrinsically associated with the future of the constitutional treaty. Indeed, many of us were sceptical from the very beginning about whether the term "constitution" should have been used. Parts of the document were subject to negotiation between different countries. When the European Union Bill was introduced before the general election, many of us said on Second Reading that there were things that we wanted to change. None the less, there was a negotiation between 25 different countries and it was probably the best package that we could get.

In the Chamber and elsewhere, I argued with Opposition Members that the draft treaty was a very good document for Britain that showed how well we had done diplomatically. I am delighted that the French agree with that argument, as 40 per cent. of people who voted no said that they did so because they believed that the European treaty would be better for Britain than for France. People who argue that the constitutional treaty is on a life support system and that the pro-European ideal must die have given a premature verdict: There is a fundamental choice. Many hon. Members have said that this is a significant moment with an historic choice to be made, but that choice is not the one that has been presented to us. It is a choice between a pragmatic and patriotic adherence to Europe and an ideological attitude towards Europe.

Mark Pritchard *rose—*

Chris Bryant: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman to see whether he is pragmatic or ideological.

Mark Pritchard: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman conceded that the treaty is dead. I hope that he will inform the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary that that is the case, as they seem to be dithering and giving a different answer on any given day. He may therefore wish to pass his thoughts on to Ministers. Does he agree that there is fundamental paradox in his argument? Many Conservative Members who argue

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against federalism are accused of threatening jobs, yet federalism has caused the highest unemployment in Europe since the second world war.

Chris Bryant: It is good to see new Members taking part in these debates—it would be good to see a few more Labour Members doing so. However, I gather that the Conservative party was so divided last week that it was not until late yesterday that it decided the topic of today's Opposition day debate. Many hon. Members first learned that there were was going to be a debate on European affairs and the European constitution when they saw the Order Paper this morning. I think that that shows a gross discourtesy to the House.

Angela Browning *rose—*

Chris Bryant: I will not give way to the hon. Lady. She can get back into her teapot for a few minutes longer.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I urge the hon. Gentleman to remember the rules on the use of language in the Chamber.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would merely say that the hon. Lady used that phrase against me a few months ago when you were in the Chair. In all humility, Madam Deputy Speaker, I apologise for using such language. *[Interruption.]* I urge the hon. Lady to restrain herself for a few more moments, as I am still trying to answer the question that the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) asked about federalism.

It is dangerous to use the word "federalism" in debates about Europe without being precise about its meaning. Different European countries have different federal structures. France is a federal country and Spain has asymmetric devolution. For some people, federalism means subsidiarity and taking decisions at a level as close as possible to the people affected. For others, it means trying to bind everyone together into a single unity. It is therefore important that we use the word "federalism" with care.

Angela Browning *rose—*

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady must surely be given the opportunity to make the intervention that has been burning within her heart for many ideological months.

Angela Browning: On a point of information, I was advised by Conservative spokesmen of the subject of this debate on Monday night. They thought that I might have a passing interest in it.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady has just revealed a gross discourtesy to the House if that was known by Conservative Members on Monday, but not revealed to the House in time to appear on the Order Paper yesterday morning. I hope that you can investigate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is time that we returned to the substance of the debate.

Philip Davies *rose—*

Chris Bryant: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in the hope that he will bring us back to the subject and explain when he was first told about the debate.

Philip Davies: I shall stick to the subject of the debate. The hon. Gentleman mentioned subsidiarity, which appears in the Government amendment. I understand that that means that decisions should be made at the most local level. Does he therefore agree that the best way to ensure that decisions are so made is for all decisions to be made in the House, not in Brussels?

Chris Bryant: The most important thing is that decisions should be made at the most local level that is appropriate. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] It is an important point. Historically, the Conservative party has not supported devolution in this country, but many of us argued the case for it, because we believe that decisions on, for example, the health service or education should be taken at the most local level possible. The people with the best understanding of those services are those who use them locally. That is what we should try to achieve in the European Union. We should not adopt a federalising tendency if it means creating a uniform Europe, but it is pragmatic to try to enable different European countries to co-operate systematically and not on an occasional basis when that can create added value.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making a point about voting at national and local levels and each European country having its own democratic system. If those democratic structures do not have any power over the local economies, is that democracy not meaningless?

Chris Bryant: It would be quite meaningless. In a changing world environment where countries such as India and China have entered the market much more forcefully we must consider how we can both protect the economies of individual EU countries and make sure that their Governments have the powers that they need to tackle economic problems and create high employment and low unemployment. At the same time, we must try to ensure that we create a sustainable and competitive market that is large enough to build prosperity for the whole of Europe. I am 43, and I have lived in Spain, Belgium and, briefly, France. The economic changes in those countries have occurred of necessity and have been helped, not hindered, by the European Union. I also point out to my hon. Friend that the treaty made it clear that, on nearly every economic measure, a vast array of powers would remain with the member state. The British Government tried to ensure that that was in the treaty from the very beginning. Our fundamental choice is between taking a pragmatic attitude to Europe and taking an ideological one. In my view, we must try to develop a new consensus within the 25 countries in Europe.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin asked when the draft treaty will be declared dead. As I have said, it is on life support, but one tends to try to bring the whole

family together before one switches off the life support mechanism, which is what will happen over the coming weeks, rather than leaving one person, the doctor, to make the decision.

We should develop a new consensus. Nobody in France or Holland, or for that matter in Spain—the Spanish feel bruised, because many people have ignored their resounding yes vote—voted for the status quo in Europe. That is not to say, as some, including the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), have argued, that they voted for Europe to be rolled back, but they did not vote for Europe to be preserved in aspic.

The Council, which is probably the least transparent supposedly democratic body in the world, is one of many problems. This afternoon, the Minister said that the Council could legislate with greater transparency without treaty change. In my view, we should go a step further and ensure that transparency exists not only when the Council is legislating, but when it is deliberating, because many of the negotiations and processes are as important as the final decisions.

Similarly, many countries feel that the role played by member states in the decision-making process is not sufficiently substantial. Who can tell whether the treaty was worded correctly on that point? However, national member states' Parliaments should maintain their role, even if the treaty falls by the wayside.

Mr. Walter: A treaty may not be necessary to address the transparency of the Council, on which I intervened on the Minister, and the role of member states' Parliaments, because such decisions could be taken in the Council. Perhaps the Government will adopt my proposal, because the UK will have the presidency in just a few weeks' time.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point in part, like the curate's egg. The transparency of the Council is entirely up to the Council, which could decide that it wants to operate on the basis of transparency without a treaty. However, if the Council were to implement a provision for member states' Parliaments to play a role, when the first problem arose, one of the member states would go to court, which is why a new treaty would be necessary. The difficulty is that many of the changes that all hon. Members want cannot be implemented without a new treaty. It may be a case of, "The treaty is dead. Long live the treaty."

The hon. Gentleman and I might also be able to agree on the ability of member states to leave the EU. As he knows, there is no current provision for any member state to leave the EU. If a member state held a general election and decided to leave the EU, it would probably just do it and pick up the pieces afterwards. It would, of course, be more sensible to introduce a process of negotiation, which the treaty provides for, whereby a member state could leave the EU, if it chose to do so. That process should probably take place under QMV rather than a process of unanimity, which is currently the probable system. It is another area in which treaty change would be necessary to proceed with something that nearly everybody in the British body politic agrees is a good idea.

Most people probably agree that the European Commission's powers should be more clearly delineated. I used to work for the BBC in Brussels, which is Conservative Members' two major bogeys in one. When I worked in Brussels, although the Commission had no direct power to determine whether the BBC licence fee was state aid, it chose to interfere fairly regularly because that was the thrust of the treaties. The European Commission's role should be more clearly delineated, which would be in the Commission's interest and our interest. It would also help to address the democratic deficit and some people's lack of understanding of how Europe works. Again, treaty change is necessary to achieve that goal.

Poland and Spain liked the voting system in the Nice treaty. Some people wondered whether the new system of double majority voting would be accepted in Spain, because it put Poland and Spain in a less advantageous position and the UK in a stronger position. That system must be changed, but, again, it is written into the Nice treaty, so, again, treaty change is necessary.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned the number of commissioners. The EU Commission was unwieldy when there were 15 commissioners, but we must be inventing jobs for people now that there are 25. If any further increases occur, it will be practically impossible for the Commission to maintain any sense of corporate responsibility. We must move to a position in which the commissioner works for the whole of the European Commission rather than for the individual member state that put them there. I know that that is the basic principle on which commissioners are theoretically appointed, but sometimes it does not feel like that.

Mr. Maples: Is not the problem that the Commission has powers of its own, including the sole power to initiate legislation? If the Commission were more subservient to the European Council and the Council of Ministers, the commissioners' nationalities would not be a problem because it would be more like a civil service. One of the problems with the constitution was that it made the Commission more powerful, which would have provided individual countries with a greater incentive to ensure that they had a player on the Commission.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman has made half a good point. The European Commission should be more like a civil service that works to the political direction of the Council. To achieve that objective, however, the Council must become more transparent, which is a sine qua non—Latin is the order of the day. The treaty made it clearer that the Commission is not always in the driving seat and that it is sometimes subservient.

Mr. Hendrick *rose—*

Chris Bryant: I am hesitant to give way, because the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) just asked whether I was still speaking. I shall conclude my speech in the near future, but first I shall give way.

Mr. Hendrick: In his reply to the previous intervention, my hon. Friend might have mentioned that the Commission work programme must be agreed by both the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The Commission does not come up with proposals that other people must swallow.

Chris Bryant: That is a good point, which takes me to another—namely, that the rotating presidency process

[Chris Bryant]

gives the Commission too much power. A much tighter presidency of the Commission established for two and a half, or possibly even five years, and based on the Council, would create a much better chance of keeping the Commission working to the political guidelines that have been set by the elected Governments of the member states of Europe, rather than the other way round. I hope that we will find some way of abolishing the rotating presidency. Again, this is an area where there is a great deal of consensus but where I suspect that treaty change will be required if we are to move forward.

The one area where I suspect that there will be no consensus between Labour Members and the Conservatives is the extension of qualified majority voting. In many of the areas in which QMV was extended in the constitutional treaty, it was only common sense to do so. In many of the more controversial areas, there were—although this was rarely mentioned by no campaigners—opt-outs, or opt-ins, for member states that wanted them. In many areas, Britain would be cutting off its nose to spite its face were we not to push for further extension of QMV, a classic instance being energy policy, whereby one country can all too easily prevent British companies from doing business elsewhere in Europe by using its veto.

I said earlier that there is a fundamental choice between a pragmatic and an ideological position and I have outlined a series of areas where one could pragmatically move forward to a new treaty. If that is cherry-picking, I am happy to cherry-pick, but I believe that it is simply being pragmatic. Interestingly, what we have seen over the past year from the Conservatives—oddly, ever since the party changed its leadership—is a move towards a more ideological position. Many Conservative Members—some are here today, although it is sad that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) is not with us—are entirely pragmatic in their attitude to Europe. However, as we have heard today, the prime Conservative argument is that we should move towards complete renegotiation on the basis of a position somewhere between that of the hon. Member for Stone and that of the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory)—that is, to try to secure for Britain a different status of some kind from that of other member states, be it associate or whatever else one wants to call it. The difficulty with that objective is that, because it would require treaty change, in order to achieve it, one would have to get every other Government, and then every other member state in Europe, to agree to it. At the moment, I can discern only two political parties in Europe that would support the Conservatives' position—the National Front in France and Herri Batasuna in Spain—so they would find it difficult to argue their case.

Over recent months, that argument has been adapted towards withdrawal from specific pieces of treaty obligations such as the social chapter, the overseas aid provisions that were made in the Maastricht treaty and the common fisheries policy, as primarily advocated by the hon. Member for Stone. That is a dangerous path for the Conservatives to tread.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman is completely misrepresenting my position. Let me just give him one fact. In the Convention on the Future of Europe, I made common cause in the democracy forum with representatives from other countries who did not belong to established political parties to advance the cause of democracy. What is important to me is to get together with the people of Europe, as we have shown that we can, following the two shattering defeats in France and Holland. The hon. Gentleman would do better to listen to the people of Europe rather than casting false aspersions on someone who fought this right from the word go.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman has made a series of different arguments over the past few years. I think that I have listened, as attentively as possible, to every single one of the speeches that he has made in this Chamber. Perhaps I am not as intelligent as he would want me to be, or perhaps his position is contradictory. The internal contradictions in the Conservative party position, from which I do not think that he wishes to dissociate himself, are so manifest that it is difficult to understand why Conservatives cannot see them. Without getting the Governments of other member states to agree to a renegotiation on the basis that the hon. Member for Woodspring wants to advance, I do not see how they can possibly argue their case with credibility.

Today, we have heard a new development in Conservative party ideology—the single market is now up for grabs, too. The Conservatives want a renegotiation of the single market. I thought that that was simply the view of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), another man of whom I am a phenomenal fan because he keeps the Conservative party in its current position. However, it is difficult to understand how the Conservative party could go to the people of Britain arguing for withdrawal from the single market.

Mr. Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: I shall not give way, because Conservative Members are saying, "Please don't give way to him." I believe that that is because they want to be rude to me, not him.

A new Member, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), advanced the extension of the Conservatives' ideological position. He called for a referendum on whether we should remain in the European Union. He did not reveal whether he would argue that Britain should leave the EU—*[Interruption.]* Yes, he would argue that Britain should come out of the EU. It is good that some Conservative Members are finally coming out of the closet on the matter.

We should acknowledge our debt to the EU. Europe, not alone but with NATO, has brought peace to a warring continent. It has extended human rights in a way that many people would not have thought possible in the dictatorships of Spain, Portugal, Greece or the eastern bloc. It has made possible a shared market where many can share in the prosperity that was once enjoyed by only a few European countries. It has also enabled freedom of movement so that one in four British people take a European holiday every year.

I believe that, in 100 years, we will not bemoan today as a terrible date for Europe but think that Europe still has a long way to go.

3.36 pm

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech this afternoon. It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who spoke with eloquence and passion. I could happily have listened to him for many hours except that I was anxious to break my duck. Although I do not know him personally, I have tremendous regard for his work as a parliamentarian and a constituency Member of Parliament.

I am the first maiden to speak in the debate and I therefore crave the House's indulgence. I am surrounded by some titans of the European debate and I feel them straining at the leash to make their points. I applied on Monday morning to speak in the debate, and although I did not know the subject, I had a shrewd idea of what might come up. Consequently, hon. Members will be relieved to know that I have had time to write a short speech.

As the new Member of Parliament for Wantage, I have won an especially poignant privilege. Whenever I walk into the Chamber, I pass under the shield of my most illustrious predecessor, Airey Neave, who served what was then known as the Abingdon division for a quarter of a century before his cowardly murder by republican terrorists. I never met Airey Neave but his name, spirit and reputation live on in my constituency. It is a matter of personal pride that I attended the same college as him—Merton college, Oxford.

I was selected as the Conservative candidate for Wantage as long ago as 2002. From that time, I worked extremely hard and very closely with the sitting Member of Parliament. At the end of those three years, he joined the Labour party. I have tried not to take that personally. Despite that humiliation, hon. Members may be surprised to learn that I feel that I owe Robert Jackson a huge debt of gratitude. It is thanks to him that I achieved something that has been all too uncommon in recent elections—I took a seat from Labour and gained it for the Conservatives. Hitherto, my record in that respect had not been good. When I stood in Labour-held Bristol, East in 1997, I turned a Labour majority of 5,000 into one of 17,000. I am therefore delighted that history did not repeat itself.

Robert Jackson's decision to leave the Conservative party and join the Labour party caused his many friends and supporters in the constituency a great deal of pain, sorrow and not a little anger. However, I am sure that they would join me in acknowledging his contribution as the Member of Parliament for Wantage for the past 22 years—indeed, for more than a quarter of a century if one includes his service as a Member of the European Parliament. Robert Jackson was an assiduous constituency MP. He was involved in a huge range of issues but, above all, he played a major role in maintaining the scientific pre-eminence of my constituency.

In my constituency is Harwell, the home of Britain's first nuclear reactor, which was built in 1947 and at the time generated enough electricity to boil a kettle. My constituency has a huge scientific heritage not just in Harwell but in Shrivenham, where the Royal Military college of science resides. During his time as a Member of Parliament, Robert Jackson championed that scientific heritage and played a major part in bringing the Diamond synchrotron, the largest UK-funded scientific project in this country for 30 years, to Harwell.

This morning, some of my hon. Friends, on seeing my tie, expressed concern, not because, as a so-called Tory moderniser, I was actually wearing a tie, but because of the colour of my tie, which I should explain to the many readers of *Hansard* is deepest red. However, my tie has nothing to do with politics. Although it is not an uncommon occurrence for Conservative Oxfordshire MPs to cross the Floor of the House, that is not my intention. My tie is related to something far more important than politics: football. This is the tie of Didcot Town football club, which last month won the FA Vase at White Hart Lane. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am grateful for that. Hon. Members are free to sign an early-day motion recording that fact. Their victory has put a huge smile on the face of Didcot, which is the largest town in my constituency—I sometimes feel that it should be called Wantage and Didcot.

Didcot has hitherto been known mainly for its railway station and its power station. It now has a cup winning football team and a new town centre is being built. Rightly, there has been a huge surge in civic pride in Didcot. Didcot is a boom town, home to more and more highly qualified professionals attracted by its rural setting, excellent transport links and first-class job opportunities. It sits at the centre of one of the most economically dynamic areas of the country.

In Milton park, next door to Didcot, we have hundreds of modern, dynamic businesses, including RM, the largest private sector employer in Oxfordshire and, for aficionados of trivia, the largest manufacturer of personal computers in the UK. Nearby in Grove, we have Williams Formula 1, and elsewhere companies such as Oxford Instruments and numerous other hi-tech and bio-tech firms.

Despite the economic dynamism of the constituency, it is still overwhelmingly rural in character. It is an area steeped in history and tradition. Wantage is the birthplace of King Alfred, and the nearby village of Uffington is the birthplace of Thatcherism, because it is where the late Sir Denis Thatcher's forebears hail from. To the south of Wantage lies the ancient Ridgeway, and nearby can be found the ancient chalk horse that gives the Vale of White Horse its name, as well as the hill where St. George slew the dragon.

At the eastern border of the constituency sits Wallingford, a town which celebrates its 850th anniversary this year, but which I think over the next few years will become known as the town that educated my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson), who I should acknowledge as a former youth team player for Didcot Town football club. Looking at him now, he seems ready to take them into the upper leagues.

Near the western border of my constituency sits Faringdon, which still bears the physical scars of the English civil war, and which has recently become the first fair trade town in the south-east. In Grove, we have the largest village in Europe, and in Steventon we have the largest village green in England.

Truly this is a constituency of superlatives. If hon. Members feel that my hymn in honour of my constituency sounds too much like a tourist information

[Mr. Edward Vaizey]

brochure, I make no apologies. If I do not sing its praises, nobody else will, because the Liberal Democrats have just closed all the tourist information centres.

The subject of today's debate—the future of Europe—provides, for me, an interesting symmetry, because it was the subject of Robert Jackson's maiden speech as a Conservative Member of Parliament. While his views on Europe may have had much in common with those of the hon. Member for Rhondda, they had much less in common with mine. Nevertheless, in that maiden speech, Robert Jackson said, rather prophetically, that

"no free polity can succeed whose actions run ahead of the comprehension and consent of its subjects."—[*Official Report*, 28 June 1983; Vol. 44, c. 521.]

I believe that recent events have proved him right. In my view, the European constitution was a step too far for the European Union. That is why it has been roundly rejected by the peoples of two of the founding members of the original European Community.

For far too long, the agenda of the EU has ignored the desires and wishes of the peoples of Europe. The nation state, far from declining, is reviving on our continent. The new members of the east, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) pointed out, are rejoicing in the rebirth of their sovereignty and enjoying the opportunity to run their own affairs at last. If I may be so bold as to say it, they do not necessarily owe their independence and freedom to the EU, but to America and NATO. Even in old Europe, national pride remains a strong emotion. After all, as London, Madrid and Paris compete to win the venue for the Olympics, they do so not for the glory of Europe, but for the glory of their nations.

The European Union must work with the grain of national identity, not against it. It should seek to evolve and develop, not to impose an artificial blueprint on unwilling peoples. The death of the constitution—that is what it is—presents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) mentioned, a unique opportunity to re-evaluate the role of the EU in the 21st century. That means several things. It means a much lighter touch from Europe; it means far fewer laws made in Brussels and a vast swathe of laws returned from Brussels; it means a focus on reform that encourages enterprise, growth and job creation—not, I hasten to add, in Brussels, but in the whole of Europe. It also means an approach that binds us together only so far as it is essential and beneficial for all.

Today, to my generation at least, the EU seems out of touch and a relic of the past. I come from a generation that has travelled not only in Europe, but all over the world, whose horizons extend far beyond Europe. If we have the courage and foresight to take advantage of the current crisis, we can build a new European consensus for a new age—one that looks forward, not back; one based on honesty and transparency, consent and not compulsion. We want a Europe of nation states trading freely with each other, not subsumed within an artificial construct. That seems to me a vision worth fighting for. Any other approach should be one that we fight against as vigorously as we can.

3.48 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) on his maiden speech, which was very impressive, indeed—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I did agree with much of it. It was confident and competent. Although it is the custom not to intervene on maiden speeches, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would have dealt with any such interventions very readily and brushed them off with ease. He has a significant future ahead in the House and his reputation goes somewhat before him. I greatly enjoyed listening to his fine speech.

The hon. Gentleman's predecessor, Robert Jackson, who latterly joined this side of the House, came over for specific political reasons, but I did not agree with him on any of them. He obviously did not move very far to the left; in any case, he certainly did not reach me. He moved over specifically on account of his support for the EU and his support for the war. I cannot remember the other issues—[HON. MEMBERS: "Tuition fees."] Yes, tuition fees. I clearly remember not agreeing with a word he said, but there we are. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his enjoyable maiden speech.

The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) is no longer in the Chamber, but I was impressed by the fact that he had read Erich Fromm's book "Fear of Freedom". I read it in my youth, and another book by the same author entitled "The Sane Society". As presently organised, the EU is not a sane society, and we ought to try and make it saner in the future.

I welcomed the no votes in France and Holland, as they presage a new beginning. We must not pretend that the verdicts were passed simply by the people, as specific sections of those societies voted against the constitution—working people, socialists, young people, and trade union members. In other words, it was people of the left who voted no as a specific rejection of neoliberalism. They rejected the deflation of the eurozone, and they objected to the drive towards a world of unconstrained market forces. Many of them when interviewed said so specifically, and I agree with them.

People in France and Holland have seen unemployment rise to unprecedented levels in the post-war era, while growth has weakened. In fact, in the last quarter of last year, the economies of Italy and Germany contracted, while welfare state provision has been salami sliced and future pensions threatened. Moreover, the word "reform" has appeared again and again. In the past, that word had a progressive flavour. In 1832, it meant increasing democracy and the power of people over their Governments, and that Governments had more power over their economies.

Nowadays, reform seems to mean handing back power to the market and away from people and their elected Governments. I do not accept that. That trend is most obvious in the eurozone, and many people believe that the post-war social democracy that worked so well across the whole of Europe is now under threat.

The crisis goes deeper than a mere rejection of the constitution. People are increasingly aware that the direction being taken by the EU is not what ordinary working people want. They are saying no to the broad drift of Europe. They want a different Europe—the sort of Europe that I want too.

I supported enlargement precisely because I thought that it would provoke the sort of difficulty that I have described and bring matters to a head. Two of my colleagues on this side of the House who take a Eurosceptic view voted against the Nice treaty on the grounds that it was pro-European. I voted in favour of it, because I thought that enlargement would weaken the EU's central core, against which we have railed for so long.

Indeed, one of the last speeches made in this House by Sir Edward Heath—who, as a matter of fact, used to sit in the place occupied by the Leader of the Liberal Democrat party—was against enlargement. He thought that it was impossible for countries with very different economies to merge in a single economy. He wanted a deeper and stronger western European alliance—what one could consider to be the old core Europe. I think that he was right. Retaining the old Europe strongly controlled from the centre meant that member states' economies had to be very similar. I think that it will be impossible to bond 25 separate countries into one economic unit and, given Turkey's possible accession to the EU, the number may be even greater.

We must reassert democratic control by elected Governments over governance by right-wing bankers and eurocrats in the European Commission and the European Central Bank. Interestingly, after the French referendum decision, the French President replaced former Prime Minister Raffarin with Dominic de Villepin. The new Prime Minister is allegedly a Gaullist, or at least his Gaullism is stronger than his economic liberalism. He is committed to the state—l'état—which he sees as being above the market. That represents a significant change in French politics. He may not remain in post for very long, but his appointment at least represents a shift back towards Gaullism rather than towards economic liberalism.

De Villepin is a true conservative and not a liberal. The posters in the no campaign across Europe urged people to say no to liberalism. In this context, the word liberalism does not mean slightly left of centre. It is used in the sense of economic liberalism.

Mr. Hendrick: Is not my hon. Friend concerned that Mr. de Villepin has never held elected office?

Kelvin Hopkins: Yes, and in our constitution such an appointment would be unacceptable. However, under the American constitution, for example, Cabinet members are frequently appointed who have never stood for election. I do not approve of that approach, but it is in the French constitution and the Assembly and the President are elected democratically.

The Conservatives are equally divided. The history of Conservative policy on Europe over the past 20 years or so reveals an internal struggle between traditional Conservatives—I hesitate to call them Gaullists—and the neo-liberals. Mrs. Thatcher had political schizophrenia, because she could not make up her mind whether she was a neo-liberal or a nationalist Conservative. She gave way to the neo-liberals in accepting the Single European Act. I opposed that Act—I was not a Member of Parliament but I wrote and spoke against it—and the same was true of Maastricht. However, her successor, John Major, was a neo-liberal and was pro-Europe. Indeed, he still says much the same today. Had Mrs. Thatcher chosen not to support the Single European Act history might have been different, and the issue might have been easier to deal with now than it is.

I was opposed to both the Single European Act and the Maastricht treaty, and I would have been happy—had I been a Member of Parliament—to work with the Labour Opposition against the latter. Unfortunately, we did not have quite enough votes at the time to defeat it, but had we done so we would have solved a big problem and saved a lot of trouble in the future.

Like many other hon. Members, I believe strongly in a looser association of democratic member states, co-operating for mutual benefit, and not in a bureaucratic, neo-liberal superstate, which is what others have in mind.

John Bercow: The hon. Gentleman raises the spectre of an essentially economically liberal European Union, but it has been extraordinarily well disguised in recent years, unless there is something wrong with my eyesight. Given that globalisation is driven on the one hand by the development of technology and the demands of commerce, and on the other by the rules of the World Trade Organisation, the hon. Gentleman is engaged in an ultimately futile mission if he thinks that objecting to a treaty will prevent that process. He might better attend to the argument by dealing with the issue of the volume of legislation that is driven from Brussels rather than from this country. On globalisation, I suggest to him politely, that he is fighting a losing battle.

Kelvin Hopkins: Well, we shall see whether the people of Europe, and indeed the world, will accept a neo-liberal globalised world or whether they will react against it. We do not know what will happen, but I suspect that many people question the direction of the world economy and the rules governing trade. At this very moment, demonstrations against the G8 are being planned. I do not want to broaden this debate too far, but I believe that working people across the world question that direction. As I have told the House before, I was on holiday in Portugal some five years ago and saw a notice on a building site saying:

"No to flexible labour markets."

At least, that is my translation from the Portuguese. The authors of the sign were clearly aware that flexible labour markets meant less security and lower wages, and they did not want that.

The Keynesian world created after the second world war was fairly structured, controlled and regulated. It involved redistribution of income, a degree of public ownership of public utilities and big welfare states, and it worked—at least, until 1970 when we started to unravel it all. The 19th century liberals got hold of the world again and started to get their revenge on the Keynesians. It was a political struggle even then and to this day there are three tendencies in this Chamber. There are the Labour party democratic socialist-social democrats. There is the Conservative party that wants to stand up for the country but still believes in a bit of inequality and noblesse oblige. And then there is a neo-liberal group with members in all three parties—and I think the Liberal Democrats are split three ways. Those are the three political tendencies in this Chamber and

[Kelvin Hopkins]

across the world, and we must recognise the struggle between them. It is not recognised properly at the moment, because two of the tendencies are represented in my party, two in the Conservative party and all three in the Liberal Democrat party.

I have heard debates in this Chamber about Europe and about world trade rules, and I have heard the same speeches from all three Front-Bench representatives. None of them represented my view, or indeed that of the European workers who have just voted in the referendums.

There is a real problem. People are realising that giving away control of one's macro-economic policy by joining the eurozone was a disaster for Germany and Italy. It was beneficial to Ireland because it joined at low parity for its currency. It was forced to cut its interest rates and received a 5 per cent. net fiscal transfer to its economy from the European Union. Imagine if the British economy had received a net transfer from the EU of £55 billion every year. We should be doing pretty well, too. In fact, we are doing well without it.

Mr. Paterson: I went to Ireland with the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs in 1997 shortly after I was elected. We met the head of the Irish development commission who said that although the European grants were nice, the real trick to the success of the Irish economy was corporation tax at 10 per cent.

Kelvin Hopkins: That is an interesting point and I should like to debate it with the hon. Gentleman, although I cannot help but feel that being forced to cut interest rates and being given 5 per cent. of one's economy is quite helpful.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Surely, receiving £6 million from the Common Market every week for five years was what put the south into a good position.

Kelvin Hopkins: I have an interest in this matter because my constituency includes the largest Irish community in the east of England. Many of those people came to England 20, 30 or even 50 years ago from extremely poor backgrounds and many are now returning to a prosperous country that has done well from its membership of the EU. The situation in Spain is similar; Spain still receives substantial net transfers. On the other hand, countries such as Germany and Britain have to make those transfers, and I shall refer to those contributions later.

More important is having one's currency cemented into a single currency at an inappropriate exchange rate and being unable to change it. The interest rates were too high for the German economy and Germany can do nothing about it. The Germans have even been told to cut their borrowing but that will deflate their economy even further and put it into a worse state. An economic crisis in Germany could give rise to unpleasant politics and if we do not consider that we may have problems. I can quite understand why 56 per cent. of Germans want the Deutschmark back.

Former Chancellor Erhardt, who created the German economic miracle, must be turning in his grave. He was not a socialist but a Christian Democrat who believed in moderate managed capitalism. He would say that the currency is obviously overvalued. He always kept it slightly undervalued to give Germany a competitive edge. That is how the German economic miracle was achieved—by building up a big trade surplus with every other country in Europe. Good business, if nobody notices. That is what Germany did in the past but now it is doing the opposite. Germany cannot solve its problems without withdrawing from the euro, recreating its own currency and adopting a more sensible macro-economic strategy.

The Italians are even further along that route. A member of the Berlusconi Government has called for a referendum on reintroducing the lira. I should strongly support that, albeit from a position on the left rather than from Mr. Berlusconi's Government, with whom I do not sympathise.

Mr. Hendrick: I thank my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way again. Is he not making the same mistake as many people in France and elsewhere, in that he is discussing the euro and monetary union when in fact the vote should have been about a new constitution to make the EU work better?

Kelvin Hopkins: The constitution was a consolidation of earlier treaties to provide one treaty that covered all aspects of EU arrangements. Indeed, I have suggested in previous debates that there should be two treaties—one for the eurozone countries and one for the whole of Europe, so that we could separate the eurozone component. On that basis I might be more sympathetic to the proposal, although I am not saying that I would vote for it. If one could adopt the constitution without implicitly accepting Maastricht and the Single European Act, I should be much happier about it.

Mr. Brady: Perhaps I can help. The hon. Gentleman may be looking for article I-8 of the constitution, which explicitly says:

"The currency of the Union shall be the euro."

Kelvin Hopkins: Indeed, and there are many more provisions relating to the European Central Bank and so on, so clearly the treaty covers the whole of Europe but includes the eurozone component, which should be separated. The majority of European Union members do not belong to the eurozone and many are unlikely to join—including Britain, one would hope. Indeed, it is just possible that the whole thing might dissolve fairly soon and we shall be saved the trouble. But we certainly would not join the euro at this moment, for all sorts of reasons, but particularly because it is very uncertain.

If or when one country, perhaps Italy, chooses to withdraw from the eurozone and recreate its own currency—which is possible; it is not too difficult—the whole thing could start to crumble. All it needs is for one elected majority Government in any member state of the eurozone to say, "We think this isn't working; we are going to withdraw," for the whole thing to start to crumble. We could then start again with a more sensible economic arrangement in Europe, based on each country having its own currency and its own macro-

economic strategy but working together with the other countries co-operatively, in a sensible way but on a voluntary basis.

John Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way again. It is most unfortunate that the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) is so coy about discussing the perfectly relevant subject, in this context, of the euro. Does the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) think that might have something to do with the fact that, at any rate the last time I looked, the governing council of the European Central Bank comprised three Germans, two Dutchmen, two Finns, two Frenchmen, two Italians, two Spaniards, a Belgian, an Irishman, a Luxembourger and a Portuguese, and the Government have never been able successfully to explain how or why it would ever be in the long-term interests of this country to have the interest rate judgment made for Britain on the say-so of those people, who owe no loyalty to our economic interests?

Kelvin Hopkins: As so often, the hon. Gentleman has an encyclopedic knowledge of these things, which I do not possess. I did not know the nationalities of the European Central Bank council members, but I am interested in what he says. I believe that they are appointed for eight years. They are deliberately appointed in a way that ensures that they are not subject to political control by their own country. Deliberately to create an institution that controls one's economy, which has no responsibility to any kind of democratic structure, is an abnegation of democracy; it is daft economically, but in democratic terms it is extraordinary. I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman says, but I think that those people will spend increasing amounts of time pondering their navels in the next few years because the economies will be in difficulties.

Mr. Hendrick: I thank my hon. Friend for his excessive generosity in giving way to me a third time. Is he saying, then, that apart from the new provisions in the constitutional treaty, citizens of other countries are actually now passing judgment on every other previous treaty, as he is? Do the people who opposed previous treaties now want to bring the whole thing down? If so, why do not people say that they are for withdrawal from Europe and disintegration of the European Union instead of pretending that this is about the new provisions in the constitution?

Kelvin Hopkins: I am very positive about Europe. I see myself as historically, culturally, linguistically and geographically European and I want Europe to work, but it will not work on this basis. That is the problem. I go to the continent of Europe for holidays every year. I like nothing better than France, Italy and Germany—they are wonderful places. I want them to work. I want to have good relations with my German, French and Italian neighbours. I want to enjoy their company, try to learn their language and even drink their wine, but I want us to do that on a happy, co-operative basis where we all volunteer to work together for our mutual benefit. I do not want to see half my trade union colleagues and half the socialist voters in Germany and France out of work because the economy is not working. So I want a Europe that works, not one that does not work, and the one that we have at the moment does not work.

I am not just going to whinge about the unfairness to Britain of things, because we are doing quite well—outside the eurozone, I may say, and several other countries are also doing quite well outside it, by contrast with those inside. Before I draw to a conclusion, I want to talk briefly about the rebate, because it is significant. It is not just about our money and their money. The gross contribution is currently about £12 billion, and it is likely to rise to £14.5 billion in three or four years, according to today's newspapers. Well, £14.5 billion is a fair amount of money. I should prefer it to be spent on hospitals, schools or pensioners, for instance.

I appreciate that there are countries in the European Union that are poorer than us. There should perhaps be transfers between rich and poor countries on a co-operative basis. The problem is due not to our giving money to poor countries, but to the perverse operation of the common agricultural policy. I have said here many times that we should abolish the CAP, and make the problem disappear. I have said, in the Chamber and in Committees, that if we want a fair budget that everyone would accept, we need contributions and receipts on the basis of differences in prosperity. Rich nations should contribute according to their ability, and poor nations should receive according to their needs. That would be fair, and everyone would know how it worked and would accept it.

I have suggested that many times in Committees. I do not know whether it was just me, but it is significant that the last EU document we looked at in the Chamber, shortly before the general election, specifically rejected my suggestion without giving any good reason. It said something along the lines of "It has been suggested that the budget might be distributed according to relative degrees of prosperity in the different nations of Europe. We reject that because, because, because . . . " I do not remember the precise reasons, but they were not very persuasive.

The CAP is not just unfair to us; it is unfair to the rest of the world. I have argued that if we want to subsidise agriculture, European member states should be able to do so from their own budgets. If there are countries that are poorer and countries that are richer and we want to work together to aid the poorer countries, there should be fiscal transfers from the richer to the poorer.

If we abolished the CAP, the budget problem—the rebate problem—would disappear. That is what Ministers should say next week when they discuss these matters with their European colleagues. If the CAP is abolished, we will not ask for a rebate. It is very simple.

Other people may say that the European Union might then start to fall apart, because the CAP is what glues it together. Inventing some grotesque form of agricultural subsidy to hold the EU together, however, is illogical and silly. We ought to work co-operatively, on the basis of international solidarity and a mutual interest in helping other Europeans—and, indeed, people throughout the world. We would all then be happy to be in the European Union, but a European Union completely different from the one that we have now.

4.12 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): The House heard a delightful maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey). It was

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very competent, and we look forward greatly to my hon. Friend's future contributions. We also heard two contrasting speeches from Labour Back Benchers—the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who sadly did not wait to hear comments about his speech, and the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), with whom I have debated these matters on many occasions.

Those speeches showed that divisions on this European Union issue exist within the parties as much as between them. The hon. Member for Rhondda could offer no more elevating metaphor for the European Union than that of a corpse, or rather a near-corpse on a life support machine. All he could suggest was that the family, as he put it—presumably the other Heads of State—should gather round the bed to decide who should switch off the machine. That is not a very elevating or exciting vision of Europe with which to energise future electorates.

I agreed much more with what was said by the hon. Member for Luton, North, as I often do. He was right to tie the question of the euro to that of the constitution. It is pitiful to behold the dilemma of the German Government. They are trapped in a currency system that they do not control. They can do nothing. They have happily broken the ludicrous growth and stability pact, which was not delivering growth or stability, but they are still quite unable to change the value of their currency or let it adjust, or to change their interest rate. It is a pitiful sight to see the engine of European prosperity for so many years after the war reduced to that status—a terrifying warning of what happens when a country loses control of its currency.

Mr. Angus MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman describes the difficulties of one-size-fits-all economic policies. I should like to point out that we in Scotland suffer from the same problems. Indeed, a former Governor of the Bank of England once said that the price worth paying for economic prosperity in the south was unemployment in the north. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that once-size-fits-all economic policies create difficulties; they have certainly done so in the European Union and, indeed, in my constituency, which has lost 11 per cent. of its population in the past 10 years.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the hon. Gentleman would advance the case for Scottish independence and win an election on that basis, he might be able to set up not only an independent Scotland, but an independent currency—he could debate that issue at that time—but I would observe that the United Kingdom is an optimum currency area because there is completely free movement and a great deal of labour mobility between the parts of the United Kingdom. I contrast that with the eurozone, which, as the chief economist of the European Central Bank has observed in recent days, is not an optimum currency area and is very unlikely to become one.

Kelvin Hopkins: Within national economies, there is scope for substantial fiscal transfers, which can overcome the problem of having a single interest rate throughout an economy. However, within the EU, the fiscal transfers would be politically impossible because of their vast size.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman makes another telling point. Although there is no true analogy between the different situations, I would always examine the case for a Scottish currency in the spirit of rationality and fair play, but I would not recommend it.

I want to return to the Prime Minister's promise. It is a bad start to a new Parliament that the right hon. Gentleman has already broken a promise. It was quite explicit. In answer to me and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), he said that in all eventualities, even if other countries said no, we would have a referendum on the issue. The Minister for Europe now says that the Prime Minister was answering a different question, but he was not, and the *Official Report* bears that out. Therefore, an apology, or at least a better explanation, is due from those who sit on the Treasury Bench before this debate is over.

Of course, it may well be that the Prime Minister—living, as he does, in a world of supranational European politics, where the public hardly ever intrude—has never countenanced the possibility that the public could ever wreck this party. That is a pretty feeble excuse, because Ministers were warned repeatedly and emphatically throughout the European Convention that those proceedings were not just ignoring but contradicting the instructions given to the Convention in the Laeken declaration of December 2001.

The Laeken declaration, drawn up by Heads of Government, was fairly candid about what was wrong in Europe. It referred to the gap between the people and the leaders, to the excessive bureaucracy and to the complexity of the treaties, and it mandated the Convention, on which I had the honour to represent the House, to create a more democratic, simpler Europe, closer to its citizens. That was the phrase used. It mentioned the possibility of creating a constitution only as an afterthought—that was not the instruction given to the Convention—but once the Convention started to sit, some of those involved forgot the instructions and went ahead with the constitution. Almost all the members of the Convention regarded it as their duty and priority to give more powers and influence to the very European institutions that were causing the problem in the first place, with every encouragement from the British Government. It is a bit late to say now that there should have been more thoroughgoing reform.

It is rather puzzling that Government spokesmen bait the Opposition about our demand for renegotiation. The process was the most profound renegotiation possible because it was envisaged that all the existing treaties would be repealed and replaced by the constitution and a new legal order. What could be more radical than that? Our position is that we want a genuine renegotiation that gives not more but fewer powers to Europe. I am not scared of the allegation that we want renegotiation. I lived through a failed renegotiation, so I want a proper one.

Even more scary is the fact that the Foreign Secretary is catching the European disease of trying to implement failed proposals by the back door. I was in the Chamber to hear his statement on Monday, in which he said that certain changes could be introduced by "other means". He even gave some examples, such as strengthening the role of national Parliaments. That is a complete fraud, because the constitution would not strengthen national Parliaments. The right hon. Gentleman might have been

referring to the subsidiarity proposals, but that rule already exists in treaty, so the constitution is not needed to enact subsidiarity.

The only measure that was devised was that if national Parliaments objected to a proposal on the grounds of a breach of subsidiarity, the matter should be referred to the Commission so that it could decide whether to proceed, but we have such a system at the minute. I was a member of the European Scrutiny Committee in the last Parliament. The Committee often objected to measures on the grounds of subsidiarity and wrote to the Commission, which wrote back to say, "Sorry, we're still going ahead." There is no advance from that in the European constitution, so it is completely untrue to pretend that there would be a new great role for the House under it.

The Foreign Secretary cited changes to the voting system as a good example of a measure that should be implemented by other means. The constitution would introduce qualified majority voting in 63 new areas, including sensitive matters such as social security and the criminal justice system. That is intensely controversial, but according to the Foreign Secretary, it is a modest measure on which we can all agree, so he can slip it in without a referendum or even a proper treaty change.

The introduction of more qualified majority voting will simply give the European institutions the ability to legislate, but we do not suffer from too few directives and regulations. What is more, the Foreign Secretary has not explained that the mechanism for taking decisions by majority voting will become much easier. Rather than more than 70 per cent. of weighted votes being required to implement a measure under qualified majority voting, the percentage required will fall to 55 per cent. of member states, representing 65 per cent. of the population.

So, not only will qualified majority voting be extended to 63 new areas, but it will be much easier to get votes through. Does the Foreign Secretary think that the people of Spain were voting for that, and does he really think that the people of France and Holland did not object to it? I submit that that is precisely what people were objecting to. How can it bring Europe closer to the citizen if decisions about matters such as immigration, asylum, the rights of the accused in criminal trials and criminal procedures are taken away from member state Parliaments and the electorate after a general election and given to the European Union? It is a complete contradiction of the instructions given to the Convention on the Future of Europe. That is why people are saying no.

The problem transcends matters of left and right. The hon. Member for Luton, North comes at such things from the perspective of the left. I respect that. Of course, a great deal in the constitution should be anathema to a socialist, such as the instruction that competition shall be "free and undistorted". I do not know how many socialists there are left in the Labour party—

Kelvin Hopkins *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Well, there is one, and we listened to the hon. Gentleman and agreed with him, but not on this point.

Whether people believe in competition or not, it is wrong that a country should sign up to a constitution that forbids competition being overruled. Under the constitution, it must be free and undistorted, as stated in article I-3 of the constitution, judiciable by the European Court of Justice. Of course, the entire constitution has primacy over the laws of member states.

Whether the French or anyone else vote for a socialist Government in the future, they will come up against that fact, in the constitution, which forbids the creation of a socialist economy and society. From a right-wing perspective, those of us who believe in the free market find much to object to in the new powers over economic and employment policy. From our different perspectives, we both believe that such matters should not be decided in advance in a constitution, but should be left to future electorates to decide through the democratic system.

A proper constitution, like the American one, is a boxing ring—a set of rules—into which people get to fight it out according to the democratic process. Once those decisions are removed from an electorate and entrenched in a constitution, there is less democracy, not more. That is why the French and the Dutch voted against the constitution.

The Government have retreated into a hope for European economic reform. I hope that they have told their Members of the European Parliament about that, because they recently voted against the working time directive opt-out in defiance of their Government. Labour MEPs do not believe that working hours should be set by national Parliaments. They want all such matters transferred upwards to the European Union.

Then there is the Lisbon process, which we all remember being launched five years ago. We also remember what the Prime Minister said about it. It marked

> "a sea change in European economic thinking. It points Europe in a new direction . . . The Lisbon European Council represents a turning point in Europe's approach to economic and social policy."—[*Official Report*, 27 March 2000; Vol. 347, c. 21–22.]

It did nothing of the sort. Many reports since then, including some from the British Treasury, have shown that nothing has changed. The only hard-edged proposal to come out of the Lisbon process is for the services directive, and that has been abandoned as an unsuccessful and futile bribe to the French electorate.

By all means let the Government promote economic reform, but it is essentially a matter for each country. If the French want to opt out of the world economy to have a protectionist system, let them do so. It is rather odd that the supreme aim of British foreign policy is to insist on reforming our business competitors. In return for struggling to reform the French and German labour markets, we face a blizzard of job-destroying and business-destroying regulations. We pay nearly £4 billion a year in an annual tribute only to be told what to do. We cannot even suggest the obvious reform in Europe, which is to get out of the euro. It is still Labour party policy—official Government policy—that we should join the euro and be submitted to the same rigours of economic policy as the wretched Germans.

The point is this: even if we succeed in magically transforming the entire economy of Europe, it does not solve the problems identified in the Laeken

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

declaration—the alienation, the gap between rulers and ruled, the fantastic complexity of it all, which the constitution has, of course, made worse. I have here the existing treaties—bad enough at 184 pages of pretty complex provisions, but nothing like as bad as the Foreign Office version of the constitution, which runs to 511 pages even though the draftsmen were told to reform it, so in fact that is the simplified version. In the Convention I made the modest proposal that, if our aim was to simplify Europe, we might start by attacking the acquis communautaire. Of course, my proposal was ignored.

In fact, the position is getting worse. As I said, I was a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, which last year examined 1,080 new bits of European regulation—more directives, more laws, more regulation adding to the acquis communautaire. There is no appetite or drive for simplification, and if there is, it is not shared by the Government. It is all talk. My group of friends in the democracy forum in the Convention tabled specific amendments to prune the European institutions, to reduce the budget and to get the institutions to listen to the European Court of Auditors. Not one of our proposals was supported by the British Government representative on the Convention.

John Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend not think that his argument is strengthened by reflection on the wording of the provision on subsidiarity and proportionality in the treaty of Nice? That states:

"The application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality shall respect the general provisions and the objectives of the Treaty, particularly as regards the maintaining in full of the acquis communautaire and the institutional balance".

In reality, where there is exclusive competence, subsidiarity and proportionality do not get—and are not intended to get—a look in.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend makes an unanswerable point. The subsidiarity requirement has been in the treaties since 1992 and has been widely ignored. His other point is also extremely valid. Subsidiarity is exempted from those areas in which the European Union has exclusive competence—areas that the constitution expands, thus making the position worse. As long as it is in the hands of the very institutions that do so well out of defying it, there is not the remote possibility of subsidiarity being made a reality.

The ultimate arbiter of subsidiarity, as of everything else, is itself a European institution: the European Court of Justice. Just as the Supreme Court in the United States was the engine of federation after the republic was founded, so the European Court of Justice performs the same role in the European Union. My small group of genuine reformers in the Convention tabled more than 400 amendments to tackle some of those issues, all of which were ignored. However, I think that we had something to say—not on behalf of the Ministers and Governments of Europe, but on behalf of the people of Europe.

I believe that there is another Europe trying to be born. To my hon. Friends I say that, if we are to modernise the Conservative party, we must take it upon ourselves to try to modernise Europe and our relationship with Europe as well. We can start to rise to that challenge by listening to the electors of France and Holland. In the short term, the task must fall to the Government. Rather than fiddling around with a few cosmetic reforms or trying to implement bits of this wretched and discredited constitution by the back door, the Government should grasp the opportunity for Britain to take a genuine lead in Europe. Deep surgery and fundamental reform are needed. The opportunity exists to take a lead in Europe and to create a people's Europe rather than a Europe for politicians.

4.35 pm

Mr. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Last week I went to Brussels, to speak not to Members of the European Parliament or to members of the Commission, but to a group of young people drawn from Belgium, the Netherlands and France. The purpose of my visit was to hear from them at first hand their views about Europe, the European Union and the referendums in France and in the Netherlands.

Most of those young people had voted no in the referendums. When I pressed them on that there was no simple and straightforward answer by any means. Many of those young people felt alienated from the political system in their respective countries. Many of them also felt alienated from political elites. That was not only at a European level, but also at a national level. Many did not relate to politics in the traditional definition of that term. That alienation found expression in voting no in the referendums.

Many of those young people felt aggrieved by the policies being pursued by their respective Governments. There was some personal hostility to President Chirac and Prime Minister Raffarin. There was no uniformity in terms of what the young people were rebelling against but there were certain European policies which they did not relate to, understand or see in their best interests. Those sentiments also led those young people to vote no in the referendums. Let us just say that what happened among young people in France and in the Netherlands defies simplistic analysis—it is a complex phenomenon. What happened is not, however, peculiar to young people in France and in the Netherlands. We must be careful not to say that it is all down to the EU because people feel alienated from it. The malaise goes much deeper than that, and we must be honest in appreciating that.

Although there was a difference of opinion between the young people whom I met about why they voted no, there was no widespread opposition to the idea of European co-operation and association. Many recognised that the EU had contributed to the fact that we have had peace in the European continent for the longest time in its history. They recognised that, appreciated that, and wanted that achievement to be preserved.

They recognised also that on issues such as the environment it was necessary in the modern world for national Governments to co-operate and not simply tackle the problems of environmental despoliation nationally. They understood that there was a need for European and transnational co-operation generally on such an issue.

A few of them recognised, too, that there is a need in a global economy, where increasingly we see trade blocs being established, for the EU, on behalf of the people of Europe, to have a powerful voice in organisations such as the World Trade Organisation. Above all else, although there was a raft of reservations, they recognised that people in different countries in the EU see themselves as not located in one particular or narrowly defined labour market. They understood that people see themselves as perhaps having a choice to work in their own region, their own country or elsewhere in the continent of Europe. They understand that the single European market has helped to bring that about. We are seeing more and more young people travelling across the EU and across the globe, taking advantage of the new opportunities that are opening up.

I took some encouragement as someone who believes in European co-operation, in which I believe our best interests lie. The young people to whom I spoke were not embracing a narrow, inward looking nationalism. They were groping towards a future new definition of their involvement in Europe. That is something that this country needs to take into account.

I was intrigued by the comments of Opposition Members, particularly the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). There was a significant elaboration of Conservative policy today, the likes of which we have not witnessed for some time. If I analysed the hon. Gentleman's comments correctly, he was questioning not the usual things that Conservative Members question such as the extension of qualified majority voting, but a fundamental cornerstone of the European Union—the single European market. In the past, many Conservatives called for a rapid completion of the single European market, and Labour Members are doing so now. However, the hon. Gentleman called for a re-examination and unpicking of the whole ethos of the single European market. That has profound implications, because the single European market is the most important part of the European Union. It has proved to be of great economic benefit to the UK, let alone other countries.

In contradistinction to Opposition Members—I am sure that they will make their arguments more vehemently in the coming months—Labour Members, in association with members of other parties who wish to join us, will make a positive restatement of the case for European co-operation. It is incumbent on us, however, to say clearly that we do not want a centralised Europe or a European superstate. We do not want what some continental Europeans call a federal Europe. We want a Europe based on individual nation states working in co-operation and harmony. Where there is commonality, there must be deeper co-operation. If that is our starting point we can begin to hold a long overdue debate with the British people. If we are honest with ourselves we will accept that there is a great deal of misapprehension, confusion and, without wishing to be patronising, ignorance among the British people about what the European Union is and what it could be. We must go back, as I said, to basics, and talk about what European co-operation involves. The fine detail of the constitutional treaty or the ramifications of directives and regulations are not important, but there is a basic necessity for us to work together as European people with mutual self-interest. That fundamental case has to be made in the UK, and our presidency of the EU provides us with the ideal opportunity to do so.

As well as providing an opportunity to make the case for Europe, the British presidency will allow us to consider what happens once the treaty receives its official death knell. It is important that we are not locked into the view that it is a take it or leave it document. Some members of the European Commission have hinted that we might accept it through the back door, but that would be quite wrong. On the other hand, some believe that the whole enterprise is dead and the treaty is best forgotten. We should be honest and accept that there were good things in the constitutional treaty, which is why many of us were prepared to argue vigorously for a yes vote in a British referendum. It is therefore incumbent on us to look carefully at which parts of the constitutional treaty can be implemented in a constructive and consensual way.

I was pleased that the Foreign Secretary suggested on Monday that we could focus on increasing the involvement of national Parliaments in the European decision-making process. I listened carefully to the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) on that matter.

I must be honest and say that I would have liked the stipulations on national Parliaments in the constitutional treaty to have been stronger, but I nevertheless recognised that it was a good starting point. We must build goodwill among national Governments and, indeed, members of the European Commission, so that when the Commission floats ideas on a European level, the initial stages of legislation come to national Parliaments for consideration. That does not happen now because, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, much of the European legislation that comes to this House, and to the European Scrutiny Committee in particular, has already travelled some way down the line.

The draft constitutional treaty proposed that as soon as the European Commission had an idea—a law in gestation—it would be considered by national Parliaments. I want national Parliaments to continue the process of extending co-operation at a European level through organisations such as COSAC, so that they can exercise a collective voice as well as their individual voices.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend therefore support this simple change, which the British Government could introduce now and which has been advocated frequently: the European Scrutiny Committee should be able to accept and vote on amendments? If necessary, such votes could be brought to the Floor of the House. The change could be made immediately, and it would resolve many of the difficulties that concern my hon. Friend. It would also address the concerns of young Dutch people, who have not had the opportunity to vote on many of the things that have been imposed on them from above since the inception of Benelux.

Mr. David: My hon. Friend has made an interesting point, but I ask her to note that the European Scrutiny Committee currently has a scrutiny reserve, which it can

[Mr. David]

ask the Government to take into account—if the Government were to fail to do so, they would have to account for their action in Committee—and that scrutiny reserve should be examined and possibly strengthened. I hope that hon. Members will take seriously the Modernisation Committee's recommendations on how European scrutiny can be improved in this House.

Frankly, it would be nothing short of a disaster if hon. Members assumed that we should not discuss European scrutiny in this House because the constitutional treaty has reached the end of its life. We should recognise that recent events are a catalyst for our taking our European obligations far more seriously in this House. I believe in the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity. Leaving aside possible religious connotations, subsidiarity is about national Parliaments exercising the greatest possible say about European legislation, and we must make sure that our own structures are as effective as possible in order to do so.

Whatever reservations people might have about the EU's economic role, there is a general consensus that if the EU has a meaningful function, it is to stimulate job creation through the single market. This debate has shown that the single market must be made more effective, and many of our continental partners must ensure that their markets are more in tune with what is happening in the UK, which is why the Lisbon agenda is vital. The Lisbon agenda is about improving efficiency and competitiveness, and we must use the British presidency to make sure that that takes place.

But let us be clear too that this is not an abstract economic debate—it is all about creating a dynamic British and European economy because we are linked together in the interests not of a self-serving elite but of the ordinary people of this country. We are close to full employment in this country, and that is because of effective economic policies. We need to ensure that we move towards a situation of near-full employment in the rest of Europe, and the way to do that is to ensure that the Lisbon agenda is implemented effectively and vigorously. We must make the connection between what people want and need and what is possible through European action. That connection is not always made by politicians.

These and other issues must be debated vigorously in this House and across the length and breadth of this country during the next few months. The debate needs to be honest, as well. If some Conservative Members believe that the real agenda is not about how to make Europe more effective and more in tune with people's realities, but how to unpick the single market of the European Union and manoeuvre us towards a situation in which withdrawal becomes a serious option, then for goodness' sake let them say it openly, publicly and clearly, so that we all know where we stand.

Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about a full debate. Surely that includes listening to the people, and one way in which we could do that is by having a full referendum on the constitution.

Mr. David: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether he was here earlier, when that issue was debated and, I would say, exhausted. Ultimately, we have to recognise that the constitutional treaty would come into effect only if there was agreement by all member states of the European Union. Two member states have already rejected the European constitution, and the conclusion is pretty self-evident.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I ask the hon. Gentleman this simple question: if, as he says, this situation has arisen because two members have voted against, why does the Prime Minister want us to go ahead and wait for the ratification by the rest of the members of the Union?

Mr. David: It is not for me to speak for the Prime Minister, but that is not my understanding of his position. The Government are saying, quite sensibly, that we should wait to hear what our partners have to say in the European Council. We are part of the European Union, and I would like to see a collective decision, but as far as I am concerned it is pretty obvious where matters are leading and in which direction we are pointing.

It is vital that we have an honest and open debate in the country. As some Members have said, we are at a crossroads in Europe's development. We have to take the debate away from elites, whether they be in the European Parliament, in the Commission, in the Council of Ministers or, indeed, in this Palace of Westminster, and have it with the people of this country. I am absolutely confident that the arguments are overwhelming, but if the debate is held openly, honestly and frankly, the people of this country will recognise the worth of European co-operation, as they have in the past. We have a marvellous opportunity to have that debate over the next six months when Britain takes the presidency of the European Union and will give an effective lead not only to Europe, but to this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Before I call the next speaker, I point out that many hon. Members are waiting to try to catch my eye and that unless speeches are considerably shorter, many people will be disappointed.

4.54 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): As I sat and listened to the debate, I was reminded of what happened in the House, of which I was a Member, when we voted ourselves into the Common Market. I remember one incident in particular. The Tory Government depended on the votes of the small Liberal party but Labour colleagues thought that Liberal Members would remain faithful to them. The leader of the Liberal party was sitting in the seat directly in front of me and, at the end of the debate, a Labour Whip—I shall not name him—took his Order Paper and smacked the Liberal leader over the head. The House was a bedlam. That was our entrance into the Common Market.

It is strange to note that people on both sides have changed their views. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David) was a Member of the European Parliament, of which I was also a Member. The first time I went to Europe, the Labour Benches were filled with people who were anti the Market. The Tory party was divided. Some members were against the Market and others wanted it as it was. However, that has changed over the years.

For the first time, everyone in the United Kingdom has to face the fact that the European Union has not been what the politicians painted it to be—Conservative, Labour and other politicians painted it to be something different. The reality for those of us who sat in the European Parliament for many years—I sat there for a quarter of a century—and watched the proceedings was that certain allies came together in the government of the Common Market. They were intent on doing what they wanted their way. I believe that the people of Europe have realised that and they are saying, "We will not be dictated to by the Government and elite of our country. We are going to show them that we have strong feelings about the European Union."

That feeling was manifested in the French. Who would ever have thought that the French would turn against the EU? Who would have thought that the Netherlands would turn against it? However, they have. We are now faced with deciding whether to heed those people's message or try to stop the people of other countries from giving their message. I believe that the United Kingdom and its people should have the opportunity to give its judgment on the matter.

It was convenient to have a referendum in the offing during the election campaign. It was a good way of putting off consideration. The EU was not an issue in the campaign because those who were asked about it simply said, "Oh, we're going to have a referendum," thus putting it on the back burner. However, the time has come for this nation to have an opportunity to express itself on the issue.

I was interested in the speech of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who told us—another hon. Member has already repeated it—that the Union was lying there and no one knew whether it was dead or alive but the machinery was working. He said that everyone would come and decide whether to switch it off. Do we want our country to be governed by such a Government? People are looking for a Government who know what people need and who will honestly face up to the wishes of the people and to what they promised the people.

It seems in this debate that, if someone speaks against what is happening in Europe, they are accused of wanting to get their country out of Europe. I fully believe that there needs to be co-operation between the states in Europe. We all need that co-operation. Anyone who has read European history knows that it is necessary for the European states and their national Governments and Parliaments to get together to pursue their own mutual interests and to deal with the issues that affect their people. I am all for sovereign Governments co-operating with other sovereign Governments on the things that they can do together to secure the best way forward for the people, but I do not believe that a superstate should be created.

Opponents who take a different view must realise that there are those in Europe who want to create a superstate. Federalism as we know it means handing over certain powers to a central body. If the people who hand over those powers want to recall them, they can do so, but the superstate then says, "We will give you a little bit, we will give you something more, but we will dish out what we want and keep the powers that we want." By doing that, it robs the Parliaments that make up the nations of Europe of real power.

The people of Europe know nothing about a little village in my bailiwick called Ahoghill. Some of the Ministers from here who visit me say, "Ian, what about this village, Ahoghill?" I say, "You could go down and ask about it and you will never find it." The decisions affecting that village should be made as near to the people as possible. That someone in an office in Brussels should have the right to say "That will go there and that will go there" is nonsense. There would be bound to be opposition from the people. The people need to be heard. We will have respect in this nation only when the people can say that the politicians are doing what they said they would do, but we in this House cannot do what we promised if there is a superstate out there that can call the tune for us all. I do not want to dance to the European tune. I want to dance to the nation's tune. We all have to face up to that.

I have heard you say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you do not want long speeches. I am reminded of the apostle Paul, who in a certain part of scripture kept saying, "Finally, brethren." I am not going to do that. I am going to sit down now.

5.3 pm

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): From what started off as a European coal and steel alliance in 1951, born from the ashes of the second world war, the countries of Europe have evolved into a huge trading bloc with 450 million customers. From just six countries—Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands—Europe now finds itself, as many other hon. Members have said, at a crossroads. In 2004, the EU saw its biggest ever enlargement, with 10 new countries joining. The markets of all the nation states have now been harmonised and integrated by the introduction of rules on consumption taxes, such as VAT, on excise duties, common standards and labelling. Much of that evolved from the Single European Act.

I must confess to being amazed when I heard the shadow Foreign Secretary earlier today. He seemed to suggest a substantial shift in the Conservative party's position on Europe in the direction of throwing into doubt his party's commitment to the Single European Act, which was supported by the Thatcher Government at the time. When the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) talks about replacing common standards and harmonisation with mutual recognition agreements, she is talking about unravelling generations of agreements between the member states of the EU and moving towards the idea of Europe as a free trade area.

Angela Browning: What does the hon. Gentleman think of the fact that the EU has more than 60 bilateral agreements, with countries as far away as Mexico, on favourable tariff terms, but without the harmonisation directive that is the cause of all the regulations that the House has to deal with?

Mr. Hendrick: I am happy to answer the hon. Lady. Those bilateral agreements are important and help to ensure that goods coming into the EU meet appropriate European standards. If they do not meet them, they cannot be traded within the single market. That is the simple answer to the hon. Lady's question.

[Mr. Hendrick]

While economic integration has moved on at a pace, political and social integration has been much slower. That is clearly the result of differences of opinion about the EU's role. As we have heard in today's debate, there are genuine differences over which internal European policies are acceptable or unacceptable. We have seen over recent weeks, particularly in connection with the referendums, that there are divisions within, as well as between, countries about the future direction of the EU.

To those who have an apocalyptic vision of the significance of the referendums in France and Holland—believing that they bring the EU into reverse—I say that I recall the referendums in Denmark and Ireland. The Government have called for further reflection and discussion, and the beginnings of the necessary debate will take place at the European Council of Ministers next week. I am sure that a resolution of the problems now faced by the French and Dutch Governments will be reached, so that Europe can continue to move forward.

Mr. Maples: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that the main conclusion to be drawn from the overwhelming French and Dutch no votes is that the people of those countries should be asked to think again?

Mr. Hendrick: What I am saying is that those no votes cannot mean the end of the EU's development. Agreements are needed between the 25 member states on how to proceed in future. We can now fall back on the Nice treaty in respect of the governance of the 25 member states, post-enlargement, but that cannot be the end of the story. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), who served with me in the European Parliament and speaks for the Ulster Unionists, explained that when Europe was originally sold as a common market, it was very different from the EU that we have today. He is quite right. Europe has developed over many years, and such development needs to continue because the world is changing around us. If we want European development to continue, the no votes in France and Holland cannot be the end of the story.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): How many no results from referendums would be necessary before the hon. Gentleman took a different view—that the people of Europe should be listened to?

Mr. Hendrick: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. If people in other countries also vote no in referendums, the treaty that was agreed will have to be revised, but Europe will continue to go forward. It will not be the old Common Market that we joined, but it will be a Europe that retains social and political integration.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): My hon. Friend must be right to say that the fact that people in France and the Netherlands decided to vote against the constitution does not mean that we have reached the end of the European project. Does he agree that the nations of Europe will still be able to make progress on common issues, and that it would be quite wrong to stop that process? Where there is common agreement among the 25 member states on reform initiatives, it is our duty to ensure that they are taken forward.

Mr. Hendrick: I totally agree. In the future, member states that do not want to go forward on particular issues may choose to go it alone, and that is already happening in one or two cases. I am not in favour of a multi-speed Europe. I have argued, both in this House and in the European Parliament, that we should not go down that road, but it would be unrealistic to expect total agreement on every matter among all 25 EU member states. I believe that the debate on that matter will develop over the coming months and years.

John Bercow: We seem to be edging slowly towards clarity on this matter. The hon. Gentleman replied to my hon. Friends the Members for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) and for Putney (Justine Greening) in a studiously ambiguous way. Does he accept that the people of France and the Netherlands cannot be corralled into acceptance of an increase in the EU's legislative power, given that they have said no to that so decisively and explicitly?

Mr. Hendrick: I cannot speak for the motives of the voters in France and the Netherlands in their rejection of the constitution. I am sure that many voters in both countries agree with much of what was on offer, just as they obviously disagreed with other elements. I would never assume, however, that the no votes in those countries mean that all the voters disagreed with everything proposed in the constitution.

The decision-making framework designed for the six original member states has evolved through successive treaties into what is clearly an unwieldy set of procedures, as the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) so aptly put it. Nevertheless, the streamlining offered by the constitution is a step in the right direction.

If it is nothing else, the EU is a family of democratic countries committed to working together for peace and prosperity. It is not a state intended to replace existing states, but it is bigger than any other international organisation. The EU is unique. Its member states have set up common institutions, to which they delegate some of their sovereignty so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at a European level. We call that pooling of sovereignty European integration, which is what the whole process is about. Clearly, it is what Opposition Members are most opposed to.

The right hon. Gentleman, who is no longer in the Chamber, described himself as a genuine reformer. In fact, I think that he and some other Opposition Members are not reformers, but wreckers. I shall be blunt: some people are rejoicing about the no votes in France and Holland not because they disagree with the constitutional treaty proposals but because they disagree with the consolidation in the new treaty of all the other treaties going back to the treaty of Rome and the origins of the EU. So when hon. Members talk about the people of France and Holland having spoken, some

mean that they genuinely believe that all those treaties should be revoked and we should return to a Europe in which member states are not joined in a common union.

John Bercow: I fear that the hon. Gentleman distorts his argument through over-emphasis and that he has just erected an Aunt Sally. Although of course some people oppose the constitutional treaty because they oppose the EU per se, it would be unwise and arrogant to assume that they constitute the majority of objectors. A much larger number of people would like the European Union to work better and support much of what it does, but believe that the treaty would take it in the wrong direction. Their opposition is not about absolutism or withdrawal, but legitimate criticism of the institutions.

Mr. Hendrick: I take in good faith the hon. Gentleman's assertion that not all of his colleagues are totally opposed to all of the treaties. I did in fact say "some" when I made my comment. There are some genuine reformers among the Conservatives, but when hon. Members talk about the European Union going in the wrong direction but offer no alternative direction, I question their commitment to it.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Had the voters of France and the Netherlands voted yes, would the hon. Gentleman suggest that the rest of Europe should listen to them and honour their wishes? If they were given time to reflect and an opportunity to vote again, would it not be advisable for them to know the mind of the people of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hendrick: I take it that that is a roundabout way of asking whether we should have a referendum. The House will be aware, from my comments to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on Monday, that I am not in favour of referendums. However, I am not the Prime Minister, and never will be, and the decision is not in my hands. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

Angela Browning: It is the stated position of the Conservative party that we oppose the constitution in principle, as well as content. Constitutions are for countries, because they are a hallmark of nation statehood. Conservatives may have differing views on Europe and where it is going, but our stated position is opposition to the constitution in principle.

Mr. Hendrick: I accept the hon. Lady's interpretation, but I have heard differing views, not least in today's debate. Not everybody in her party takes that view, in the same way as not every Labour Member agrees with the Government's position in supporting the constitution or, for that matter, joining the single European currency.

The EU deals with many other issues of direct importance to our everyday lives, including citizens' rights; ensuring freedom, security and justice; job creation; regional development; environmental protection; and, of course, making globalisation work for everybody. Europe and society need rules. Globalisation needs rules, which is why we have the World Trade Organisation. Like many other Labour Members, I am not in favour of many of its rules and the way in which it operates, but we accept the need for rules.

I genuinely believe that the European Union has delivered half a century of stability, peace and prosperity. It has helped to raise living standards, built a single Europe-wide market, launched a single European currency and strengthened Europe's voice in the world. It has brought unity in diversity. The continent has many traditions and languages, but it also has shared values. The EU defends those values and fosters co-operation, promoting unity while respecting and preserving diversity. In the increasingly interdependent world of the 21st century it will be even more necessary that every European citizen co-operates with people from other countries in a spirit of curiosity, tolerance and solidarity.

To refer again to the intervention of the hon. Lady, I have no hang-ups about the terminology—whether the document is called a treaty or a constitution—but we would not be having this debate if it had simply been called a treaty. People's hang-ups about the word "constitution" make it much more difficult to agree to the document, especially for people from the UK, which has no written constitution. However, it has been called a constitution, and simplifying the overlapping series of treaties and protocols that provide the current legal basis for the EU is important. It is important to enhance and streamline the decision-making procedures of the Union now that 10 countries have joined the previous 15. It is also important to enable citizens to feel much closer to the EU by giving national Parliaments more say in how it is conducted. That is what the constitution does.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I have been following my hon. Friend's argument closely. I point out that I have a long history of arguing with the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), and indeed with other members of his family, so I do not always accept his ideas, but does not my hon. Friend feel that the case being made, stated plainly by someone who was part of the negotiations, was that far from enhancing the powers of national Parliaments the constitution widened the number of subjects over which European institutions took control? Far from extending democratic involvement, the constitution narrowed it.

Mr. Hendrick: I take my hon. Friend's point about the comments of the right hon. Member for Wells, but he was part of the minority group on the Convention. The majority view was the one supported and signed up to by the 25 member states. For the first time, we have a treaty that has been agreed by European politicians rather than in smoke-filled rooms, as was the case before the European Convention was set up.

The treaty establishing a constitution for Europe is extremely important and although it is clearly not acceptable in its current form, as we have seen in other member states, something similar, changed to make it more acceptable, will nevertheless be required in the future. As I said earlier, the story does not end here. The Prime Minister's announcement that he would consult UK citizens created widespread concern, as we have heard today, about the possibility that the UK might reject the constitution, which in the longer term would

[Mr. Hendrick]

jeopardise the ratification process. It might also give rise to the possibility, perhaps to the amusement and probably with the support of some Opposition Members, that the UK could one day be outside the EU, although that is probably extremely unlikely.

Of the countries that have held referendums, two have said no and Spain has said yes. The question that was framed for a United Kingdom referendum was:

"Should the United Kingdom approve the treaty establishing a constitution for the European Union?"

I think that the question should go even further, because as we have seen in today's debate, certainly from my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), some people are saying that they not only oppose the new provisions in the treaty, but wish to vote on all the consolidated texts of previous treaties, which are in the new constitution. For me, that provokes only one question: should we hold a referendum on whether we should stay in the European Union, and inform people beforehand that if the result of the referendum is yes, a new treaty will be accepted?

Let us assume that, eventually, a treaty or a constitution will be adopted by all member states of the European Union. What will have been achieved? What will the European Union have become? Will Europe ever be truly and genuinely united? Earlier, I said that the European Union is a family of democratic European countries, committed to working for peace and prosperity. It is not a state intended to replace existing states—contrary to what some people have said in the Chamber, the EU was never intended to be a state or a superstate—but it is more than any other international organisation. It is becoming an economic superpower purely because of the size of the EU internal market; the fact that all trade agreements are now negotiated by the European Union, not by individual member countries, is an important testament to that fact.

Obviously, this negotiating power gives the EU weight in the WTO negotiations. However, it is not an economic superpower governed from the centre. The EU budget accounts for just over 1 per cent. of GDP and comes nowhere close to the size of a federal budget, such as exists in the United States. So the EU is an economic superpower but it certainly is not, and is never likely to be in the foreseeable future, a competing military superpower, as some Members have suggested—but it has ambitions.

Justine Greening: Thank you for allowing me to intervene. You just talked about the size of the EU budget being minimal compared with that of the US. Are you saying that you believe it represents value for money?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I just say very gently to the hon. Lady that we do not use the word "you" when we are addressing people in this place; it is the hon. Gentleman. The hon. Lady has made her maiden speech now, so I hope that she does not mind my mentioning that.

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman talked about the percentage of GDP spent in Europe on running the European Union and related it back to the United States. May I take it that he therefore believes that the European Union's budget represents value for taxpayers' money?

Mr. Hendrick: Well, at the moment I think it does represent value for taxpayers' money. I have certainly seen in my own region the benefits of European Union structural funding, which has created thousands and thousands of jobs and continues to improve the north-west of England.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for his consistent argument. As a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, he was one of the people who scrutinised the European Union properly. This Chamber, including Opposition Members, has been criticised by some for not properly scrutinising the European Union over the last 10 years. However, when he mentions the economic factors, is not the truth that straw men are being made here? In Holland and France, the constitution became a symbol for the left, including the socialists, to attack because they did not want to restructure, modernise their economy, get flexible labour markets, and do what the Opposition have been calling for for some time, which is to perform as economic units without prejudice, and in a fair and equitable manner as we do in the UK. Is not the truth that we are debating the failure not of the constitution but of those countries to take the consequences of a proper European common market?

Mr. Hendrick: I agree with that analysis. I was not going to raise this, but it is interesting to note that the far right and the far left in France have come together—with, obviously, the help of others—to scupper the constitution. It would seem that the sensible mainstream has been drowned out by those voices. Nevertheless, we are where we are.

Mr. Brian Binley (Northampton, South) (Con): I am somewhat bemused by the hon. Gentleman's statement that the European budget has benefited the people of Europe. How does it benefit the people of Stuttgart, who have been so dependent on the Mercedes company over the last 10 years? I should be interested to hear the answer, and I am sure that they would as well.

Mr. Hendrick: I was not aware that the European Union was funding the Mercedes-Benz company, or, for that matter, the company in the city of Stuttgart. I fail to see the hon. Gentleman's point. Does he wish to repeat it?

Mr. Binley: The hon. Gentleman will know that the number of people employed by the company in Stuttgart has fallen dramatically over the past 10 years. I wondered how he felt that the European Union and its budget had helped those people specifically. I think they would tell us that they have not been overly helped.

Mr. Hendrick: I genuinely accept the hon. Gentleman's point. In fact, I would ask the people in Stuttgart what help they would have expected from the European Union. Similarly, what help would the people

at Rover in the west midlands have expected? In the west midlands, and in that region of Germany, economic development agencies will be seeking alternative sources of employment for them. Many infrastructure or business projects will find their way into those regions through European funds, and alternative employment will be found in due course.

As I said earlier, the EU is an economic superpower, but not—and never likely to be—a military superpower. On the contrary, there is a continuing commitment to NATO, and the disparate forces that make up the European arm of NATO are far from being coherent at present, although—as we are now seeing in Kosovo—they are well suited to individual tasks.

There is huge scope for further consolidation of European defence equipment manufacturers, and defence industry co-operation continues apace to improve capability. The growing research and development elements of defence expenditure mean that pooling of resources by European companies is the only way forward. However, that is more an economic measure aimed at competitiveness with the US defence giants, for example, than a strategy for a European defence force.

In political terms, the creation of a European President and Foreign Minister to speak for the Union would give Europe a more coherent voice. I believe that that would be effective in relation to issues of soft diplomacy, when the lowest common denominator will suffice in terms of the EU's response to an international situation involving, for instance, humanitarian aid or peacekeeping efforts. When it comes to hard diplomacy, as we have seen in cases such as the war in Iraq, that will not suffice. The European Union countries will continue to adopt their own policies, and, of course, retain sovereignty over the use of their armed forces.

I see a more united Europe functioning better as a single market, more coherent as a political voice in the world and co-operating more economically and politically, as it will need to if the economic and political challenges facing Europe over the next 10 to 15 years—for example, competition from China and India—are to be met by the west. The European Union has been an extremely successful experiment in international co-operation to create a family of nations that will never go to war again. I see it as the embryo, or model, of a family of nations that I would like to see across the globe, which could improve and enhance the United Nations. The EU has a big role to play in that respect, and I look forward to our achieving it in a united Europe.

5.34 pm

Mr. Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to address the House for the first time, and I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick). Your predecessor encouraged us to be brief and I shall be relatively brief in accordance with his advice.

I am particularly pleased to speak in a debate on such a vital topic at such a pivotal stage in European relations. I feel honoured to be in the company of such distinguished architects of the Conservative party's position on European subjects, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). I am pleased to say that he is one of my constituents and he chose to vote in my constituency rather than his own. I am only sorry to say that he is not with us at the moment to hear me praise him.

I am pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who has been such a champion of the position that I share in respect of the constitutional Convention. I am also pleased to participate in the same debate as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), whose position in the House I have followed since I was a small boy. Again, I am sorry that he is not here to hear me say so. I also applaud the eloquence, wit and style of the maiden speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey).

It is indeed a great honour for me to stand here today to represent the Ludlow constituency. Ludlow is my home town and that of my forebears. In fact, one Dr. Dunne, who practised in Ludlow in the early 18th century, was a pioneering exponent of electric shock therapy. I can give a categoric assurance to the House that I did not use such techniques in securing my seat.

I join a long tradition of local Members representing Ludlow. To my knowledge, with the sole exception of one individual since 1885, the seat has been held by local people: from the Windsor-Clive descendants of Robert Clive of India to Sir Jasper More, one of the most distinguished post-war Members to represent the seat, to, latterly, Christopher Gill, who would, I am sure, have made a forceful contribution if he were still here—some Conservatives Members may remember him with somewhat mixed emotions—to my immediate predecessor, Matthew Green, who hon. Members on other Benches are, I am sure, surprised is not still here.

Matthew was an energetic MP in the constituency, where he is much liked and still casts a large shadow. I hope to be able to match that, at least in part. In Parliament, he was an able spokesman on youth affairs for the Liberal Democrat party and became a knowledgeable champion of local housing need. He was rightly proud of representing Ludlow, as indeed am I.

I have represented Ludlow town centre on South Shropshire district council for the past few years, so I have a modest experience of such things, but I also come to the House with more than 25 years of varied business experience, the benefits of which I hope to bring to the proceedings of this House.

I also feel a strong sense of public duty in coming to the House and have a family tradition of such service, albeit from a rather catholic political background. My great great grandfather sat on the Liberal Benches. My grandfather sat on the Conservative Benches. After the second world war, my great uncle sat briefly on the Labour Benches before he did a very wise thing and crossed to the Conservative Benches, in contrast to the previous Member for Wantage, about whom we heard earlier.

Ludlow is one of the largest and most beautiful rural constituencies in England. The constituency stretches roughly 40 miles, from the Welsh border west of Bishop's Castle to the villages east of Bridgnorth, abutting the South Staffordshire constituency, which some hon. Members may get to know well over the next few weeks. The constituency is almost 20 miles north to south, from the towns of Broseley and Much Wenlock

[Mr. Philip Dunne]

on the northern boundary across to Church Stretton, which nestles in the Shropshire hills, south to Burford on the River Teme.

For Members who do not know the area, the Shropshire hills have rightly been designated an area of outstanding natural beauty. They have been described as the Switzerland of England and are also known locally as the blue remembered hills—especially apt following last month's general and county council election results in Shropshire. If you will indulge me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this brings to mind A. E. Housman's description from "A Shropshire Lad":

"From Clee to heaven the beacon burns
The shires have seen it plain
From north and south the sign returns
And beacons burn again."

Ludlow itself is a fine Georgian town built on a mediaeval town footprint, with one of the most complete surviving sets of mediaeval walls in not only this country, but Europe. I am pleased to declare an interest in that because I expect to become a trustee of the newly established Town Walls Trust, which was set up to fund their restoration at a meeting last evening. Latterly, the small market town of Ludlow is perhaps better known for its well-deserved reputation for good food, which is actively promoted by the food and drink festival each September. Not for Ludlow the uniformity of the nation's high streets. We boast four independent butchers and four master bakers. Until very recently, we had three restaurants with four Michelin stars between them, which might be known to some hon. Members. We also have two greengrocers and specialist cheese, chocolate and organic produce shops, all of which support local producers. If I may say so, the only thing that some say that we lack is a modern bookshop.

Although the constituency is known as Ludlow, its largest town is Bridgnorth, which is another attractive town straddling the River Severn with an historic heritage. Bridgnorth lays claim to being the aluminium capital of the country with some 600 people employed in its two rolling mill plants, which recently attracted tens of millions of pounds of inward investment. That is an important example of manufacturing excellence in my constituency that needs to maintain its global competitiveness. Bridgnorth also has several suppliers to the motor industry, some of which are suffering following the collapse of MG Rover, to which the hon. Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) referred earlier.

Overall, the constituency's economy reflects its geography. There is a strong reliance on a healthy farming and agricultural sector that is now coming to terms with the new single farm payment and the complex cross-compliance regime. As I have mentioned, there is a vital manufacturing sector, some interesting technology companies are emerging and there is a growing tourism and service sector.

However, all is not rosy. Although we live in a beautiful area, we suffer from the deprivation that can affect sparsely populated places. Immigration was an issue during the recent election, but the immigration in my part of Shropshire has been mostly from the black country and the home counties. We welcome those coming to live in Shropshire, many of whom have retired, but the consequences of that have included rapidly rising house prices and an ageing population. Local people, especially the young, have difficulty continuing to live where they have grown up. We also have declining school rolls and pressure on our community hospitals.

That brings me briefly on to the subject of the debate. The European constitution was of great concern to the people whom I met in the run-up to the general election, in contrast to several remarks made by Labour Members. My constituents' main worry was a genuine fear of greater political integration, with more regulations imposed by a remote bureaucracy over which there is scant democratic control. There was genuine confusion about the Government's position on the matter, and I regret to say that following the Foreign Secretary's remarks earlier this week and those of the Prime Minister today, they will be none the wiser. As a new Member, I wish to help the Government out of their predicament. I would be more than happy to arrange a local referendum in Ludlow on the European constitution, the result of which I am confident would give the Government a clear steer to help them make up their mind.

There are real worries about Europe in my constituency, from the hill farmers on the Welsh borders to the sugar beet producers in the east whose livelihoods are threatened by the common agricultural policy reforms that are now being implemented and, in the case of sugar, as we heard earlier, are under consideration. We also cannot afford to export more of our manufacturing base. Such matters require a light regulatory touch, not more costly directives from Brussels that try to impose a continental social model on our already overburdened employers.

Our Government have been consistently wrong about Europe and they are in danger of making another strategic blunder. They should declare the EU constitution dead and do everything in their power to lead a debate in Europe on the real reform that is needed to bring back to nation states the powers of self-determination. I look forward to pressing the Government on that and other issues in the years to come, and to standing up for the people of Ludlow in this Chamber.

5.44 pm

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne). I congratulate him on his maiden speech.

I had the opportunity in the past year to speak in, I think, three debates on European matters, including a specific debate on the constitution. I do not want to reiterate what is on the record because I am aware that others wish to speak, but I want to pick up a theme that I ran with last year that is now more pertinent, given the situation with the constitution.

I said that, in the history of what was the Common Market and now the European Union, successive Governments of both parties have painted a picture of the objectives of being part of the EU. In doing so, I did not suggest that they sought to mislead the House or the people of this country, but focused on what they omitted to say, particularly when treaties were introduced in the

House. They led people to believe that we could sign up for treaty after treaty while controlling those things that naturally worried us about them and that the end game would not be where we now are, which is a treaty and a constitution that have all the hallmarks of the final stages of creating a nation state.

When people such as myself and others, especially on the Conservative Benches, have put it to the Government of the day that political leaders in other EU states have clearly stated their objectives of closer political union and greater control of many more areas by the Commission and the EU, we have been derided. I do not mean that there has been disagreement, but that there has been active name calling by Ministers and Labour Members. The word "xenophobia" has been bandied about openly in the Chamber when we have quoted Mr. Chirac and others. The Minister for Europe says no, but his predecessor is on the record as saying just that.

Mr. Hendrick: The hon. Lady accuses us of talking about xenophobia, but she should recall the comments of the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who described the Germans as "wretched".

Angela Browning: I am not that interested in the Germans. I am interested in the British people. The Germans have had their say; the British people have not. For clarity, the Minister whom I was referring to was the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), who not only called people such as myself xenophobic, but repeated the allegation when questioned on it.

If leaders of any party or country mislead the people about the stage that we have reached with the European project, the consequences will be more serious than anything we have seen for three generations. That sounds dramatic, but if we cannot tell people the truth, and if political leaders bypass the voice of the people when they have a chance to make their contribution, as in a referendum, by referring the question back in a modified way and going around the circuit until they get what they want, not only is democracy denied, with all the implications that that has, but the European Union project, in whatever form one happens to view it, will be derailed completely in such a chaotic fashion that the consequences will ripple out.

I am not someone who ever says the word "out", however frequently I have been pressed—as I have by people such as UK Independence party supporters—but we are at a watershed, or a crossroads, in Europe, especially with the no votes from France and the Netherlands. We have to decide, and we have to be open and honest about, what sort of Europe we want. We will not all want the same sort of Europe. That is inevitable, but when people suddenly wake up to what has been done and what is being proposed in their name, they do not like it or want it. If their view is not listened to, the repercussions will be huge.

Today, I shall not attempt to put my views to the House—I suspect that many of my colleagues, including those on the Front Bench, are only too well aware of them. To encapsulate them, I would seek constructive and friendly negotiations with our EU partners to secure bilateral agreements on matters of mutual agreement and concern. I would also seek free trade, unfettered by the harmonisation rules that cause many of the problems in this place with regulation.

I see hon. Members shaking their heads, so let me explain. Some say that Parliament should be better able to scrutinise European regulation. I am not talking about the big set pieces—the treaties that the whole House deals with—but the subsidiary legislation that is dealt with in Committee every week when the Commons is sitting. Despite the fact that we have the European Scrutiny Committee and other Committees that examine each piece of so-called regulation, not one regulation has ever been overturned by the House expressing its views. That is because the decision on a regulation is made by qualified majority voting in Brussels, and the regulation is signed up to by representatives of the British Government. Sometimes, we do not vote on all of them—the regulation is considered by a Committee of the House, but because the Committees are structured to reflect the balance in Parliament, the votes in Committee are weighted on the side of the Government, who have already signed up to the regulation, so the regulation is passed and enacted in UK law. That is the system.

Mr. Hendrick *rose—*

Angela Browning: I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman before I finish my point. As an Agriculture Minister for three years in the 1990s, when dealing with European regulations, I tried desperately hard to do what I thought was in the British interest, but I was thwarted on every one. Ultimately, the unelected Commission told me—a British Minister, democratically elected and accountable to Parliament—"Sorry, but if you don't do what we say, we will fine you and your Government." We had no power and that has not changed—it remains the case today. It is simplistic of any hon. Member to suggest that merely changing the process of scrutinising European regulation will make a ha'p'orth of difference in reducing or improving the implementation in the UK of regulation from Brussels.

Mr. Hendrick: The hon. Lady is generous to give way, given that some of her hon. Friends wish to speak. May I remind her of one point that she has not mentioned? On many such issues, the European Parliament now has a power of co-decision with the Council of Ministers and issues cannot be resolved without agreement between the two. The European Parliament is directly elected by the people.

Angela Browning: I do not buy that argument. Those of us who are democratically elected to this House are answerable to the people who elect us. Our parliamentary system is such that we should be answerable: we should not send responsibility to another group of people, whether they are elected or not. I take very seriously my duty to the people I represent. I believe that I should be accountable to them and that Ministers should be accountable to me. The EU goes against everything for which the democratic process stands.

To return to my argument about accountability, honesty and saying what direction we should take, I have no problem with people on either side of the House who have for many years expressed a view of what they want from Europe and where it is going that is different from mine. That is part of the democratic debate, which I enjoy both inside and outside the House. However, it

[Angela Browning]

is no longer acceptable for any Government or Minister to attempt to deny the objectives and purpose of our relationship with, and membership of, the European Union. We have reached the position where another treaty and more of the same are not acceptable.

The people of France and of the Netherlands have spoken. I make no difference between their right to express their views and the right of the people of Spain, who have also had a referendum, to express an entirely different view. That is democracy as we understand it. I am concerned not about the people of France, the Netherlands or Spain, but about the rights of the British people, and especially the rights of my constituents. The idea that, in smoke-filled rooms, Ministers and members of councils in private meetings can cobble together some alternative because they know that they will not get the issue past the people in any other way is no longer an option.

I hope that the Minister will accept from me—a self-proclaimed Eurosceptic—that I understand that he comes from a different point of view and a different philosophy, but I demand of him and of the Government honesty and clarity, and the right for the British people to express their view. If it is the case that this constitution is dead, stuffed or any of the other descriptions we have heard today, we should give the British people a vote on what our future relationship with the EU will be from here on.

The idea that we go on without the British people having the right to express a view is wrong. Whatever that view is, it should be recognised. I have not been impressed by the way in which the Government held a referendum in the north-east on the regional assembly. They carried on as if nothing had happened. That is not my idea of a democratic assembly. If the people say no, different action is required. There is a need for a different policy. That is what I call honesty.

I was impressed and encouraged by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow, whose maiden speech built in some poetry. I am a great one for finishing off what I say with some poetry or a quotation. Cicero said:

> "A nation can survive its fools, and even the ambitious. But it cannot survive treason from within. An enemy at the gate is less formidable, for he is known and he carries his banners openly. But the traitor moves among those within the gate freely, his sly whispers rustling through all the alleys, heard in the very halls of government itself."

Honesty, integrity and openness with the House and with the British people are essential from now on with this issue. If that is not the position, the situation does not bode well either for the people of this country or for the people of Europe.

5.58 pm

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I agree with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) that a fork in the road presents itself to us. I am not sure that I agree with her conclusion about where we should go when we encounter that fork. It is obvious that the overwhelming no votes in France and the Netherlands present us with a moment of crisis in a long history of crises in the development of the European Community and the European Union.

It is somewhat ironic that the crisis seems to have been elicited on the back of a text—this infamous constitution—which by any objective measure is more modest in the changes that it proposes to the function of the EU than many of the treaty provisions that preceded it. I hope that it is not an issue of debate that the Single European Act pooled far greater areas of policy, decision making and sovereignty at EU level than the constitution that we are discussing. Yet the comparative modesty of the constitution seems to have given way to a degree of public anxiety, the depth and breadth of which we have not seen for some time.

There are many reasons for that. The fact that it was called a constitution was arguably a mistake. It was a grandiloquent mistake that implied that a relatively modest treaty provision was dressed up to be something more than it was. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) said at the beginning of the debate, the sheer pace of change in the European community and the EU—one treaty has been replaced by another, almost without pausing for breath, for a decade and a half—has perplexed many voters in many EU countries. I assume it is not a point of great dissent or debate to suggest that we need a prolonged pause for reflection. However, I suspect that as we consider what happens next, that pause will be much longer than many commentators believe.

What should we do during that pause for reflection? Instinct tells me that this is not just a crisis about the EU but a crisis of domestic politics in the Netherlands, France and, arguably, the UK. What has been lost is not only public confidence in the EU but public confidence in what Governments of all shapes and sizes in many different countries are saying to their electorates about the EU. That strikes me as a crisis of legitimacy and of confidence with much deeper roots than is often appreciated when we exchange blows about the EU and the mechanics of EU decision making. In my constituency and in groups in which I have discussed European integration, I have been struck by the fact that there is a hard-core minority that is passionately for and a hard-core minority—invariably, a little bigger, it must be conceded—that is passionately against. The vast majority of people, however, are bewildered, anxious, perplexed and confused by the European Union. They have lost their bearings and do not know in which direction the process is going.

In this period of reflection, the priority should be not to try to cobble together agreements or relaunch initiatives at EU level, but to try to re-establish in the UK and in the House a clearer understanding, free of prejudice, misunderstanding and misinformation, of what the EU is and what it is not. As the hon. Lady said, that requires a great deal of honesty and consistency. In parenthesis, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said that he would like the European Union to become more liberalised, deregulated, looser and dynamic in its economic management. When I was an MEP, a cornerstone of EU economic liberalisation in recent years was the proposal in 2001 for a takeover directive to allow British companies to take over companies in other EU countries more easily. It failed, because a number of Conservative MEPs did not vote for it. At about the same time, the "Everything but Arms" proposal was introduced by the European

Commission to open the EU market to agricultural products from about 40 of the poorest nations on the planet. Again, Conservative MEPs resisted that move towards greater liberalisation of agriculture and trade.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): I suppose the Liberal MEPs never voted against UK interests.

Mr. Clegg: We supported both proposals.

If we are going to trade blows over the European Union we need honesty and consistency. Both, however, have been lacking so far. Perhaps we should exploit the pause in the process by revisiting the well-established myths that have taken root in the domestic British debate about the EU. I have been struck by the number of times that it has been alluded to as if it were a disembodied entity or a malign spaceship hovering above us. We have no control over it—it zaps us helpless islanders with malign rules and regulations as if we had no say in the matter whatever.

The truth is that all European Union legislation is examined and scrutinised in depth by British civil servants, by British officials on the European Commission, by British Commissioners and by British Members of the European Parliament, and such legislation is always signed off in one shape or form by British Ministers in the Council of Ministers. How long should we persist in pretending that that process, in which we have a real stake, has nothing to do with us and that we do not share responsibility for decisions taken in our name in the EU?

On the myth of bureaucracy, listening to some hon. Members, one would think that the European Commission is a Goliath of unaccountable bureaucracy, but when I last looked, it was half the size of Birmingham city council. Listening to much of the debate, one would think that the European Union budget was out of control, but it is just more than 1 per cent. of EU GDP, while public spending in this country is fast approaching 40 per cent. of GDP, so the EU budget is comparatively very small indeed.

Another common misinterpretation is the suggestion that the EU is somehow inimical to economic competitiveness and liberalisation. If the history of European integration were to stop now, one of the greatest achievements would be the economic liberalisation that has taken place within the single market over the past decade or two. Could the old monopolies in France and Germany have been attacked without EU single market legislation? When I was a Member of the European Parliament, I worked on legislation to liberalise the telecoms market and the energy sector, which were highly protected sectors that British companies could not have entered without the battering ram of the EU single market.

On my first day in the European Parliament, a socialist Member gloomily declared to me that he had lost all faith in the EU because it had become a neo-Thatcherite construct, and that, like many French voters in the recent referendum, he was turning his back on the neo-liberal, Anglo-Saxon project. Perhaps that is the reason why the critique of European integration made by the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), who adopts a left-wing stance, has been arguably the most intellectually coherent and consistent in today's debate, and it was ironic to hear Conservative Members vigorously support his left-wing approach.

Turning to the allegation that EU institutions are Stalinist in their secrecy and lack of accountability, as has been mentioned previously, secrecy, lack of transparency and lack of accountability is found in one place—the Council of Ministers. I know of only two other legislatures in the world that legislate in secret like our Ministers and their colleagues in the Council of Ministers. One of those legislatures is in Pyongyang, North Korea, and the other is in Havana, Cuba, which shows the company that our Ministers are keeping as they continue to legislate in secret. On transparency, the European Parliament is an extremely porous place. Although the European Commission is occasionally dysfunctional, it is an unusually transparent bureaucracy compared with other Administrations in other capitals. Why do we not take it upon ourselves to open up the Council of Ministers to full public scrutiny? I hope that the Government take up that matter with greater alacrity in their forthcoming presidency.

We seem to agree that honesty, candour and a forthright approach should prevail on this great vexed issue. It is obvious that greater candour is needed if we are to make any headway on not only dealing with the fork in the road that we have encountered on the EU, but moving towards a broader consensus in the British political debate about the future of the EU as a whole.

6.9 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) made an interesting speech. I agree with him that far from all that the Commission has done has been wrong. For a long time, the then Common Market was one of the few proponents of free market economics in Europe, but many of us feel that it has got a bit stuck in recent years. The hon. Gentleman called, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning), for some reflection and debate in the country, but he has to face the fact that the biggest amount of reflection needs to come from those uncritical proponents and supporters of every integrationist measure that has come down the pipe, and I am afraid that those in his own party have been the least critical and the most enthusiastic. Those of us who have been sceptical about the process perhaps have a little less reflecting to do.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne) and for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) on their excellent maiden speeches, a standard that will doubtless be maintained in future debates.

In the last Parliament, these debates on Europe took on a ritualistic flavour, with the same Members making much the same speeches in much the same debates month after month and Session after Session. Until pretty recently, they shared the same characteristic—the rattle of hobby-horses being taken out of garages, dusted off and wheeled around the track at considerable length but saying nothing really new. I resisted the temptation to dust off my own speech, having made it about six times during the last Parliament and thinking that it might be helpful if we tried to move on a little bit.

Whatever our views, we all know that we have reached a turning point as regards the European Union. Something very big has happened—a constitution has been rejected by two central countries, one of which has been the driving force of the European project for the

[Mr. John Maples]

past few years. It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the reasons for that rejection. In France, those on the left rejected it, as the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) said, because it was not kind enough to the social model and too free-market, while those on the right rejected it because they wanted something a little more protectionist. Some people in France and Holland were fearful of further enlargement—they did not like what had happened and were fearful of more, particularly in relation to Turkish entry.

I group those factors under the heading of fear of globalisation. We in Britain have come to terms with globalisation and feel reasonably at home with it. It is not a party political issue—the Conservatives made significant supply side reforms in the '80s and they have been largely accepted by the Labour Government. The reason why many countries do not feel equally comfortable with it is that they are trying to protect a social model that is very difficult to protect in such circumstances. If they want to create big tariff barriers around themselves and to continue to pay high wages and receive elaborate social benefits, they can do so, but it is a recipe for falling living standards that we would certainly reject.

Another set of reasons for rejection of the constitution would have come into play in this country were we to hold a referendum—a rejection of further centralisation and giving more power to Brussels. Those fears relate to a lack of democracy. Another factor is the fear of economic failure, but a lot has been said about that so I will not elaborate on it. That is partly a problem of the rigidity of the monetary policies pursued by the European Central Bank and the very fact of having a single currency. The social model that has made labour costs very high in France and Germany has prevented them from adapting as we have.

There are a variety of reasons that do not fit neatly into any one little package. The model of—I shall try to use a neutral phrase—ever-closer integration in a European Union of 25 is dead, and I do not see how it can be taken off life support except in a coffin. It is past and we have to look for something else. I am glad, in a way, because the ever-closer-integration model was inward-looking and likely to be protectionist and to lead to economic failure. But whatever one's views as to whether it was a good or a bad thing, we have reached a crisis point and we have to acknowledge that and try to move on.

The referendums and the debate have exposed irreconcilable tensions in the European Union. There is a tension between the highly protective social model and what the French and the Germans call Anglo-Saxon capitalism. There is tension on the question of enlargement, especially on whether Turkey becomes a member.

There are also tensions about the whole thrust of economic policy—whether in future it will be low tax, deregulated, highly competitive and take the world on its own terms—and the rigidity of the eurozone. The idea that people can come out of the euro piecemeal is simply not on—the costs for any country that chose to do that would be so enormous that it would shy away from such action—but I do not know whether it will all fall apart at some point because the problem is that fiscal policy is being asked to do all the work that the shock absorber of interest and exchange rates usually does.

Are we are a free trading Community? We have 15,000 external tariffs—on ski boots, biscuits, tennis racquets and so on. Why? We would like to burn them but I suspect that many of our competitors would not. The failure of the services directive, which was the only concrete aspect of the Lisbon agenda that was still alive, again brings into play the irreconcilable difference of view about the direction of European Union policy.

There are three ways in which we might proceed. Two are dangerous. The first is the total collapse of the EU. That would be very dangerous. The EU performs a function of giving us an institutional framework in which we can talk to each other, pursue common interests, of which we have many, and has, on the whole—perhaps less so recently—been a force for good with regard to the single market. The harmonisation directives go too far. They should not intrude into matters that are not to do with the single market, although I do not believe that we would have got as far as we have on the single market without the Commission.

It is worth reflecting on the history of the first half of the 20th century and what happens when countries in Europe do not talk to each other. Although those who credit the EU with peace in the second half of the 20th century are wrong, it is important for peace in the future that we continue to talk to each other. An institutional framework for European countries to act together, talk to each other and pursue common interests is tremendously important and we must not countenance the collapse of the EU.

The second danger is a rearguard action by the integrationists, who still try to pursue an agenda that has been comprehensively rejected in two countries. I suspect that it would also be rejected in this country. History shows that such referendums are repeated. Governments have said, "We've made a couple of changes; why don't you think again, Irish people, Danes" or whoever. That is not on this time.

The third alternative is tremendously exciting. It is a much more flexible Europe. The Government should not look so glum about it because the French and the Dutch have let them off a painful hook. I do not know whether the Foreign Secretary ever genuinely believed in the constitution. The Prime Minister got there by his usual process of making little concessions and thinking that he could patch it all up at the end, never believing that it would reach the current point. The Government have been let off the hook—they are free to think new thoughts—and the Prime Minister is in an ideal position to do it. He is the only leader of a big European country with a recent strong democratic mandate to do something. The leaders of Germany, France and Italy are in considerable difficulty domestically—they do not have the authority to deal with the matter, whereas the Prime Minister does. He has a way of moving off the ground that he previously occupied and on to his opponents' without a glimmer of shame or admission. I hope he does so in the case we are considering because he could promote a new vision of Europe which would preserve what is good, make it more democratic and relevant and allow different countries in Europe to do what they want in many matters. The referendums

demonstrate that people do not all want to be told to do the same thing; they want much more control over their affairs.

I propose a flexible European Union, which we should use our presidency to promote. The Prime Minister has postponed the referendum. His saying that the constitution was dead would be the only excuse for that. Otherwise, he should hold it. I understand if, for reasons of diplomatic nicety, he wants to wait until the forthcoming summit to do that. However, the first thing he must do is tell his colleagues on the European Council, "This constitution is dead. We've got to start thinking again." Not only is the constitution dead but the programme of ever-closer union must receive a serious rethink.

The Amsterdam treaty provides for flexibility. Although the Foreign Secretary pretends that it was all to do with the constitution, the treaty of European Union, which established the European Community and was introduced at Amsterdam, allows a core or group of countries to integrate more if they want. I believe that we should have two-way flexibility. If countries with a strong European social model want to integrate more, I do not want to stand in their way. Similarly, if we do not want to be part of that, we should not have to be. I therefore suggest that we need to agree that there is a core of largely economic issues to do with the single market, free trade, and some but not many aspects of the environment and the labour market. We would accept majority voting and the Commission's role for that core. Everyone would have to subscribe to that. However, the rest of it should be à la carte, and what is à la carte should be intergovernmental. One of the big problems that a lot of people such as me and my hon. Friends have with the constitution is that it has rolled pillars 2 and 3 into pillar 1 and given the Commission authority over areas that, when set up by Maastricht, were intergovernmental. I would like what is intergovernmental to be maintained as intergovernmental, and other areas to be brought back to being intergovernmental.

We have common interests on a huge number of issues: asylum, immigration, security and the environment. We need to pursue many of them together but they should be pursued on an intergovernmental basis. *[Interruption.]* I am making my own speech. I want some machinery within which we can pursue those common interests on an intergovernmental basis. I want us to maintain our veto and to let everyone else maintain theirs, except in very exceptional circumstances.

Were they here, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition would probably agree that our agenda for the European Union over the next few years will be about its economic performance—completing the single market, the services directive, lowering tariff barriers, improving competition, perhaps through an independent competition authority outside the Commission, and budget reform. Those are much more likely to be able to be pursued in the kind of Europe that I am talking about than in the integrationist model that the constitution—

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maples: Would the hon. Gentleman forgive me if I do not? I will make a short speech by the standards of this debate because I know that one or two others want to speak.

I do not know whether that is a revolutionary thought or not—it is not to me, although it may be to others—but I want to introduce another. I hope that this does not cause too many headaches either on the Labour or the Conservative Benches. That agenda on economic performance, budget reform, tariff reform, common agricultural policy reform and the services directive is hugely valuable to us. If we could get half of that, it would be worth billions of pounds a year to our GDP. What is our rebate—£3 billion?

Everyone says that the rebate is unnegotiable. I hope that they do not really mean that. It is a good starting point in the negotiations but, if we could get half of the things that we would like—the model of a flexible Europe with a core of economic competences that we subscribe to and a more flexible, à la carte second tier around it—it will be worth us putting quite a lot into play. If we secured some of those reforms, the rebate would probably be less anyway, because budget and agricultural reform would mean that there was less of a disparity between our payments and receipts. We should be a bit careful about saying that the rebate is not up for negotiation. However, I would negotiate it only in the context of getting at least half the things on my list in the model for the future that I want.

To recap, we have to move on from where we are. I do not want to see the European Union collapse. We should try to stop the integrationists reviving their agenda and pretending it is not dead. The Prime Minister is in an ideal position. He has the political authority to do that. It suits our economic and international interests to pursue the model of a much more flexible Europe. If he did that, he could end up creating a national consensus on the issue. There has not been one for a long time. The Minister for Europe is looking amazed. The Prime Minister has to move a long way to get there but most of us in the House do not want to get out of the European Union. I speak for most Conservative Members, too. We do not want to get out. We do not want to see it collapse. We want it to be more relevant, more democratic, more responsible to people and to pursue the issues that are of interest to us. The Prime Minister is in an ideal position to do that.

Mr. Douglas Alexander: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maples: No, I am finishing. I hope that the Prime Minister starts next week.

6.24 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I will be as brief as I can. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on his very interesting comments. It is a pity that we did not hear a bit more from him. I offer my heartiest congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey), who sadly is not in the Chamber. I was pleased to see that, although a good Tory moderniser, he was wearing his tie, socks and shoes. He clearly has his head screwed on and it was good to see the Tories gain that seat.

It was great to see a Tory gain in Shropshire, and I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne) on a fine maiden

[Mr. Owen Paterson]

speech. It is splendid to have someone who is local, who stuck his head above the parapet to become a local councillor and who has good local business contacts and interests. I look forward to working with him closely on local and national issues.

There is a link between our two constituencies. My hon. Friend mentioned the Windsor-Clives. Robert Clive originally came from Market Drayton, where we have all sorts of jolly occasions because Pézenas in southern France is twinned with it because Clive went there when he was recuperating from India and taught them how to make pork pies. The hon. Members for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) and for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned that "Europe" has become an abused word, but we in Market Drayton are all in favour of trade links: we have a hugely successful Müllers yoghurt factory, producing about 2,000 million pots of yoghurt a year. The fact is, however, that we also now use the word to refer to the new political construct—the European Union.

To follow up the comments of my other neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), the EU was always intended to be a supranational, undemocratic system. Its authors were Jean Monnet and Arthur Salter, an unsung and hugely influential British civil servant. They worked in the League of Nations in the inter-war period and experienced at first hand the failures of that organisation. They mistakenly believed that the single factor most responsible for that failure was the veto in the hands of democratically elected politicians. They conceived a similar organisation, with a Commission, a Court, a Parliament and a Council of Ministers, but operated ultimately through civil servants, in which the democratic veto could be progressively eliminated. They quite deliberately created something that was supposed to be politician-proof.

The supranational concept has been reaffirmed in recent days by senior officials in the EU. The Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy, Margot Wallström, wrote on her website last week:

"We will probably now see a debate that follows with also interpretation of exactly what kind of 'no' this was."

Like British Rail's problems with the wrong kind of snow, this commissioner complains about the wrong kind of no. She went on:

"Yet there are those who want to scrap the supranational idea. They want the EU to go back to the old purely intergovernmental way of doing things."

However, the elites simply cannot ignore the voices of the peoples of France and Holland, and the frustrated voice of the British people.

I was riveted to hear the Minister say that he had to wait for the French Government to decide, but it is the French people who have decided. It is absolutely clear that both the French and the Dutch people have rejected the treaty; and it is quite clear from the polls that the British people, if the Government had honoured their promise, would have rejected the treaty. The elites have got to move on and face up to the fact that there is now a real crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon was absolutely right that there is now a crisis of legitimacy, which the elites ignore at their peril.

Intergovernmentalism means co-operation with other sovereign nation states, but the key is that it preserves national sovereignty by retaining the right to say no when national interests are affected. The proposed constitution would have topped out the structure that was originally conceived by Monnet and Salter, and effectively put all Government competences in the hands of unelected elites, under qualified majority voting, with a drastic reduction in national vetoes.

My main drift is that the current system, following successive European treaties, is failing. About three quarters of the new treaty is derived from articles carried over from previous treaties. The current system is simply not working, which is clear if we look at agriculture, for example. I was at the Stafford show last week and heard senior members of the industry saying that, because of the deluge of regulation, they simply could not farm legally any more.

I am the Opposition spokesman for fishing, and we have recently seen the devastation of our fisheries, and the contrast with sovereign nations such as Norway, the Faroes and Iceland or Canada and the US state of New England could not be more marked. There, they take decisions on a day-to-day basis; here, we have Ministers going bog-eyed tired through three days of negotiations and coming up with a regulation such as that which came before us in European Standing Committee A—on one Monday, we had 887 pages dumped on us for a Tuesday debate. The decisions had already been taken.

I also have the privilege to sit on the European Scrutiny Committee, which was mentioned earlier in the debate. Our record was debating 78 documents in two minutes. That is not scrutiny, which is why the peoples of Europe are so utterly disillusioned. This is not the way to engage people in politics. It is the exact reverse mirror image of how we used to make law in this place—with open debate on Second Reading, Standing Committees in which every detail could be scrutinised and where interested parties could amend and, above all, repeal law. European law cannot be repealed, which is why the people feel helpless and why we have seen these tremendous no votes. The elites have to wake up to that fact. The people believe that they send us here to make laws and that it is their right to remove real rulers by voting.

If the constitution is agreed, virtually all competences of Government will pass to unelected Commission members. It will be impossible for constituents in Shropshire to remove their rulers by the exercise of their vote. It is the duty of elected Members to bring those powers back. We must make sure that the laws imposed on our benighted constituents are good ones, that bad laws can be repealed, and that we can be removed if we make bad laws.

6.30 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), and to be back winding up another debate on European policy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) said, these debates can be somewhat ritualistic, but he was also right to say that things are very different now. Our debates have become more interesting.

Some excellent speeches have been made, including fine maiden speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) and for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne). Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), the hon. Members for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) and for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), my hon. Friends the Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning), for North Shropshire and for Stratford-on-Avon, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) all called for a very new direction to be taken in the EU. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells put it, a new Europe is trying to be born.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome to his new post the Minister of Europe, although I shall miss his predecessor, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), with whom I had many enjoyable exchanges over recent months. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Brent, North (Barry Gardiner) to the debate. I suspect that he is only visiting for this one occasion, but I hope that he enjoys it and does not find it too damaging.

The Minister for Europe opened the debate by talking a great deal about the Conservative party's policies, but he was less forthcoming about where the Government stand. I have enjoyed this debate so much that I am greatly looking forward to the next opportunity to discuss these matters. That will arise immediately before next week's European Council meeting, but it will be even harder then for the Minister to say nothing without looking absurd.

The people of France and the Netherlands have struck a massive blow for democracy in the past few days. They expressed with great clarity and eloquence the seething anger felt by people across Britain and Europe at Governments who seem increasingly remote and deaf to their concerns. The referendums in those two countries are a clear signal that the age of deference in politics is over, and that people will no longer tolerate political elites ruling without regard for popular opinion.

Those referendums also sent the clear signal that people are interested more in real solutions than in grand constitutional projects. The test for the Governments of Europe will be how quickly they grasp that new reality, or whether they continue to regard the people with disdain while arrogantly pursuing the same old agenda. So far, the signs are not good.

The Prime Minister of Luxembourg said:

"If it's a Yes, we will say, 'On we go', and if it is a No, we will say, 'We continue.'".

Giscard d'Estaing, one of the constitution's architects, has said that ratification would "obviously" continue, even if France voted no. At today's Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister, on being challenged about the Foreign Secretary's statement on Monday, gave the remarkable response that the statement was clear enough to him, and that that was all that counted. That says it all about this Prime Minister, and about the present Government's attitude. How very revealing that was.

I do not for a moment want to call the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) a member of the political elite, but he too thinks that the life support will be switched off. However, even he thinks that there is no reason for a fundamental change of direction in the EU.

Some politicians are preparing to carry on as though nothing has happened. They want to go back to the European project and continue the ratification of an unwanted constitution, either as a whole or by cherry-picking a bit at a time.

The Minister for Europe appeared to rule that out on 2 June. He said on the "Today" programme:

"There is no question of reintroducing the Constitutional treaty by the back door . . . You've got to recognise that some suggest that common sense changes could be introduced at the edges. That denies the reality that this treaty was extremely hard fought over by the 25 members all seeking to advance their national interests. What seems to be common sense in one country, as we've seen over the last couple of days, is judged to be extremely contentious in another. This is a Constitutional treaty which was an extremely interlocked document reflecting the hard negotiations that took place over a number of years."

He was very clear about that, just a few days ago. However, on Monday, the Foreign Secretary seemed much less certain when he said:

"If the Commission or the Council were themselves to suggest that we should introduce these things by other means, it would be absurd to put such proposals to a referendum. We ought to agree to them straight away." —[*Official Report*, 6 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 995.]

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is one of the people who has said that the reform process in the European Union is important to make it more efficient, less wasteful and better able to deal with a membership of 25 nations. Surely he is not suggesting that the whole process should suddenly stop, just because France and the Netherlands have voted against the constitution. What will happen when Romania and Bulgaria join? Surely we need to ensure that the EU operates efficiently and effectively.

Mr. Brady: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman has attended enough of these debates over the past few months to know that our position is clear. We want a more flexible European Union. We believe that we can have an efficient EU with 25, 27 or more members as long as it does less and does it better. We do believe that the constitution must stop now, because that is what the people in France and the Netherlands have demanded. We also believe that we need a more flexible, less regulated and less centralised Europe, and that is something towards which the Government should work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells made a powerful contribution from the perspective of a former member of the Convention. He debunked the myth that the voting system proposed in the constitution would increase Britain's control over majority voting. Many hon. Members have made it clear that matters cannot continue as they were. The status quo is not a viable option, contrary to the views of the hon. Gentleman.

We already know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer shares our assessment of the profound economic problems facing the EU. As he wrote in the *Financial Times* on 10 September 2004,

"Europe has a special responsibility to rise to the challenge and, starting today, make new commitments on economic reform. This is no time for complacency or consolidation but for pushing forward boldly with liberalisation. This year, the eurozone's growth rate will be half that of the US and Japan."

[Mr. Brady]

He continued:

"Only by rejecting the old trade-bloc Europe—inward-looking, inflexible and sclerotic—and wholeheartedly embracing a global Europe—reforming, flexible, outward-looking and competitive—will the EU respond to the new challenges of globalisation."

I could have written the same thing myself. There is wide acceptance that economic reform is essential, but it is only when Europe abandons the constitution and the grandiose dreams of a political Europe that the economic reforms can really take place.

The Foreign Secretary on Monday, however, could not even tell us where the Government will stand at the Council next week. He said:

"We will make judgments about our position at next week's summit—based on the statement that I have made today—much nearer the time."—[*Official Report*, 6 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 995.]

Well, it is only a week away. We hope that when we have our debate prior to the meeting of the Council next week we will have a clear statement of the Government's negotiating position and what it will press for at the Council.

Some have a clearer view than the Foreign Secretary, including the hon. Member for Rotherham, who accepted immediately after the Dutch vote that the constitution was dead. They also include Lord Kerr, one of the draftsmen of the constitution who spoke so well in the other place on Monday. He said:

"A no is a no. An American might add that two noes are a real 'no no'. I do not for a moment dispute that there is no point whatever in proceeding with a ratification process in this country. Indeed, I cannot understand the motive underlying pressure from Paris, Brussels and Luxembourg for a macabre ritual dance of ratification and referenda to proceed. I see no point in it."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 June 2005; Vol. 672, c. 679.]

Indeed, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) whose wise comments on the subject I quote regularly, as she knows, wrote an article that was published in *The Birmingham Post* a few days ago. She said:

"The Constitution was an overambitious attempt to consolidate an outdated political and economic vision of Europe. Our mandate was to bring Europe closer to its people—and we ended up alienating them even more . . . It's no good saying that the Constitution was rejected because it was not understood. Opinion polls in France showed that the more the French discussed it, the less they liked it. The same happened last year in Sweden when they voted against joining the euro, despite the campaign having been backed by the political parties, business and the media".

A wise assessment. If only the hon. Lady could communicate it to her colleagues on the Treasury Bench and get them to understand the reality of the situation.

Ministers appear unable to accept the truth, or at least to do so in public, but they will have to reveal their hand when they come to the House next week. I hope that then they will understand that, in their no vote on the EU constitution, the people of France and the Netherlands struck a blow for all of us who are fed up with Governments who do not listen, politicians who are out of touch and bureaucracies that are unaccountable. The political elites of Europe are currently in a state of shock. They cannot carry on as before, ignoring the will of the people.

As Britain prepares to assume the EU presidency, there is an unprecedented opportunity to provide Europe with real leadership, with a new vision that is right for the 21st century. The over-centralised, over-regulated and inward-looking EU that was enshrined in the constitution should be sent to the guillotine. A diverse EU of 25 nations, or more, must have the flexibility to allow each to fulfil its destiny and to respond to the democratic will of its own people. The British Government should have the courage to seize this extraordinary moment in the affairs of Europe and set a new and different course.

Ms Gisela Stuart: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman reads *The Birmingham Post*—a very fine paper.

I have been listening carefully to what Conservative Front Benchers have been saying over many months. They want a lighter Europe, but precisely which powers would they repatriate, other than fisheries? I still have not received an answer.

Mr. Brady: I have been giving the answer repeatedly for several months. Before the election we said clearly that we want to bring back the social chapter and the control over our asylum and immigration system that the Government gave away. We want to take back control of aspects of overseas aid and we want to take control of fishing. However, the most important thing is the point of principle: establishing flexibility so that powers can go back to member states and not flow only in one direction, not always adding to the acquis communautaire.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I distinctly heard the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) say in his opening speech that we were talking about the single market. Is that one of the elements that we should consider changing? Some of us want to change it.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman is right. We have been very clear and consistent. We believe that Europe is over-regulated. There are too many directives and too much legislation, which is getting in the way of British business. Incidentally, that view is shared by the Chancellor, of whom the Minister for Europe is of course a well-known acolyte.

We should make it clear that if a few other countries really want more integration, we have no desire to stop them, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon said. For the rest of us, the goal is a single market that really works, with less legislation and less regulation. Britain does not want a two-speed Europe. That implies that we are all heading for damnation, but some more quickly than others. We want a looser, more flexible and more outward-looking Europe that can compete in a vibrant world economy. If France wants a new law on temporary workers that forces more jobs to relocate in India, France can have it. We want to move in the opposite direction and the British presidency should be setting out a real programme of deregulation. It is not good enough to embark on yet another relaunch of the Lisbon agenda for economic reform while Europe's share of world trade continues to slide. At a time when voters all over Europe are saying that they want more control over their lives, a British presidency

should be making a radical case for Europe to do less; to consider which powers can be returned to member states, bringing decisions closer to the people once more.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary may be feeling a little bruised. After all, they signed the constitution. They told us that it was essential. I believe that they had even grown quite attached to it. They said that there was no plan B. Now, just weeks after the general election, the very cornerstone of Labour's foreign policy has been shot to pieces. They should, however, look on the bright side. Their European policy was limp, myopic and outdated. Now they need a new policy that is more optimistic and really focused on the twin challenges of restoring democratic control to the peoples of Europe and freeing business to face the real challenges that lie ahead. They should not be too proud to do the right thing just because the Conservatives got there first.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Barry Gardiner): This has been an interesting debate; the House has ranged effortlessly from the treaty of Westphalia to the questionable mortality of parrots. It has been one of about 16 debates since the intergovernmental conference of October 2003 that have dealt wholly or in large part with the EU constitutional treaty.

New Members have made excellent maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) made a startling admission in his maiden speech. He said that he had applied to speak in this debate without knowing what the motion was to be. Let me simply assure him: the Whips have been taking notes, but in future not only will they expect him to speak when he does not know what the motion is, but they will frequently ask him to vote when he does not know what the motion is. The hon. Gentleman paid fitting tribute to his predecessors, Airey Neave and Robert Jackson, and showed an excellent line of self-deprecatory humour. On today's performance, I shall always expect to enjoy listening to his speeches in the Chamber—and of course I shall be delighted should he choose to follow Robert Jackson to this side of the House in due course.

The new hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne) explained that his forebears, who lived in Ludlow, were well connected. He disappointed the House by explaining that this was through the discovery of electric shock therapy. He did promise that it had played no part in his election campaign, but if he would like to speak to me in the Tea Room later I will happily give him a list of those of his colleagues who might benefit from a quick dose. He spoke knowledgeably of his constituency and its people's concerns, and I wish him well in representing them in the Chamber.

Although by no manner of means a new Member, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) made an extremely interesting and thoughtful speech. Recognising the fear of globalisation, he spoke of the dichotomy between a protective social economic model and the so-called Anglo-Saxon liberalising model of Europe. He even refrained from pointing out that both the Angles and the Saxons originally came from Germany, which I thought was quite restrained of him. Significantly though, he highlighted the twin dangers of fragmentation and forced integration, by contrast with a flexible Europe with greater democracy at its core. I think many Labour Members felt that this was the speech that Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen should have made, and I hope it does not prove fatal to him when I say that I shall certainly re-read it and I hope that others in his own party do so, too.

With the French and Dutch no votes, Europe is clearly at a crucial juncture and we need to adapt our ways of thinking. As the Prime Minister said, it is a time for reflection. The constitutional treaty was constructed by 25 nation states; it is not for any one nation to declare it dead. No one would seek to pretend, though, that the treaty is not in serious difficulties, and a considered and judicious response demands that we discuss the way ahead with our European colleagues. The Government's position is clear: a treaty will be ratified in the UK only after a referendum. But even the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) must recognise the logic of saying that there will be a referendum only if there is a treaty left to ratify.

Dr. Fox: Now that the Minister has had time to reflect throughout the day, will he answer the question that we have repeatedly asked: what will the Government's position be? Will they ask the other member Governments to go ahead with the ratification procedure, or do the British Government want to see ratification end?

Barry Gardiner: It is important, in any discussions with our European colleagues, for us to let those who have listened to the voices of their own people make their judgment first. We will then join them in the debate.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: I want to make a bit of progress. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the winding-up speeches have been curtailed to allow as many Members as possible to speak, and I need to respond to the points that have been made.

The Opposition's position, by contrast, is that there must be a referendum on a treaty that they have unequivocally pronounced to be deceased. I hate to kick a man when he is down—I have always regarded it as a rather nasty spectacle—but nasty is one thing and pointless is another. If the treaty is the cadaver that the Opposition claim it to be, the only possible reason for insisting on a referendum would be a wish to dance on its grave. That is not just nasty; it is a waste of time.

During our earlier exchanges, Opposition Members were frequently asked to recall various facts that it was inconvenient for them to recall, such as whether they had failed to call for a referendum on Maastricht or the Single European Act. But perhaps the most interesting collective memory failure on their part concerned their response when Denmark failed to ratify the Maastricht treaty. Their stated position at the time was that we must wait and see. The then Conservative Government delayed Third Reading of the Bill as a direct result of the Danish no, so let them not now deny the sense in waiting a mere eight days until the European Council.

Mr. Brady: A week from today, we shall meet to debate the European Council. Is the Minister really

[Mr. Brady]

saying that the British Government are not prepared to tell the House or the British people what their position will be, and whether or not they will press for the treaty to be declared dead?

Barry Gardiner: Not only I, but the Prime Minister earlier today and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe earlier in the debate, have made the position of Her Majesty's Government very clear. In due course we will discuss these matters with our European allies in the Council.

With the UK assuming the presidency of the EU at the end of June, we have a particular responsibility to wait for, and take part in, the debate that will take place up to and beyond the European Council on 16 and 17 June. Underlying the debate are wider issues relating to the economy, globalisation and the speed of technological change: in short, the future direction of Europe.

The last two years have seen huge changes in the European Union. Ten new countries, eight of which only a few years ago were in the former Soviet bloc, are now embracing market liberalisation as part of the EU and its single market. It is easy to underestimate those changes, but Europe now forms the largest single international trading bloc in the world, and has opened up many new markets to business and investors alike.

It is worth remembering that Europe, both as a political and as an economic concept, has rarely stood still. From its origins in the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 through the treaty of Rome to the UK's admission in 1973 and the Single European Act, it has adapted to change and to economic and political circumstances in order to remain relevant.

Mr. Hendrick: In an EU with 25 members, nearly half of which will hold referendums and probably a quarter of which will want to give their Governments a kicking, how could we possibly expect agreement even on a treaty that was all sweetness and light?

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the difference that a community with 25 members makes. Indeed, he has taken up a theme that I was about to adopt myself.

In the run-up to enlargement from 15 to 25 countries, it made sense that we took a step back and looked to overhaul the way in which we do business. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) made the point that a Union of 25 members was absolutely right to attempt to reappraise decision-making procedures that had been constructed originally for just six. Whereas the treaty rightly sought to remedy that process, it did so for a purpose: simply to ensure that Europe could give the citizens of its member countries the prosperity, security and social justice that they desire in ways that reflect the modern globalised world. So I shall now turn to the substantive issues that arise from the Lisbon agenda: jobs and growth.

The Opposition motion touches on the important issue of regulation and the need to lift the regulatory burden on business. The House will know that Commissioner Verheugen has pledged to make better regulation his personal trademark. The sixth presidency initiative, which was begun under Ireland and the Netherlands last year, will be carried forward by the UK during our presidency in the second part of this year and makes cutting red tape and reducing the burden on business an EU priority.

The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) poured scorn on the Lisbon agenda and asked—I suspect, rhetorically—what progress had been achieved since the Lisbon agenda was launched. The answer is that, since then, 6 million jobs have been created in the EU; the opening up of EU telecoms has reduced the cost of UK phone calls by approximately 50 per cent., which was alluded to by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg); and the liberalisation of EU energy markets is bringing better prices, choice and better service to consumers in the UK.

With genuine respect, I suggest to the right hon. Member for Wells, who speaks with great authority on these matters, that he must not allow the long way that we still have to go to blind him to the distance travelled, but he is right to focus the House's attention on the leadership role that the UK could play in these matters. That point was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Mr. David), who talked about the opportunity that the UK's presidency afforded the Government.

During our presidency, we will work to build Europe's competitiveness in an increasingly challenging global environment. We will press ahead with the services directive. Services account for 70 per cent. of European gross domestic product and employment, but currently only 20 per cent. of trade between member states. Our aim during the presidency is to work closely with the Commission, the European Parliament and our partners around the Council table to remove the barriers that discourage service providers from establishing in other member states, thus creating the potential for 600,000 new jobs.

We will also aim to catalyse the debate about the key issue of the country of origin—the principle that allows providers to deliver services in other countries in accordance with the regulatory and supervisory frameworks of their home countries. We believe that a fully functioning internal market in services can be achieved without undermining high standards of worker and consumer protection—the two are not mutually exclusive.

The Lisbon agenda was based on three pillars: economic, social and environmental. It should be clear that sustainable growth demands that the three legs of the stool are kept in balance. We will work during our presidency to keep labour markets flexible, focusing on what needs to be done to embed quality of opportunity, alongside high performance in the workplace.

We will continue to defend our opt-out of the 48-hour week under the working time directive. Support for the UK argument is steadily growing. With more and more member states grasping the importance of securing flexible labour markets, what was a blocking minority now seems not a minority but more like 50 per cent. of

those involved, and the figure is rising. However, let it be clear that we support the directive in guaranteeing workers four weeks' paid holiday, compulsory rest breaks and a day off each week. That is a sensible basis for sustainable growth, along with progressive social policy. Progress on regulation is an essential focus of our presidency.

The hon. Member for Woodspring has shown in the Chamber both today and two days ago all the charisma, charm and diplomacy of a diminutive Doberman pinscher. His remarks about the political dinosaurs at the helm in France and Germany, and the army of Eurocrats whose careers depend on the gravy train, as he called it, were desperately ill judged. They will not win him friends in his party, or respect in Europe—

David Maclean (Penrith and The Border) (Con) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 186, Noes 331.

Division No. 7] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Peter
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Bacon, Richard
Bellingham, Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Brian
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cameron, David
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Curry, rh David
Davies, Quentin
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias
Evans, Nigel
Evennett, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark
Forth, rh Eric
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
Gibb, Nick
Goodman, Paul
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mike
Harper, Mark
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Horam, John
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald
Hunt, Jeremy
Hurd, Nick
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Jones, David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, rh Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lilley, rh Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Rev. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Malcolm
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob
Scott, Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Simpson, David
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stuart, Graham
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Tim
Young, rh George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gregory Barker and
Mr. Mark Prisk

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Bob
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Russell
Brown, rh Nicholas
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin

Burnham, Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, Alan
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clarke, rh Charles
Clelland, David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, David
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, David
Law, Peter
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacDougall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall, David
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, rh John
Price, Adam
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Jamie
Reed, Andy
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine
Russell, Bob
Ryan, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dari
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom
Watts, Dave
Weir, Mike
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wright, David
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Frank Roy and
Tony Cunningham

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—
The House divided: Ayes 374, Noes 189.

Division No. 8] **[7.16 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Bob
Alexander, Danny
Alexander, rh Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Balls, Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Alan
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, rh David
Borrow, David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Russell
Brown, rh Nicholas
Brown, Lyn
Browne, rh Des
Browne, Jeremy
Bruce, Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, Andy
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, Liam
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Campbell, Ronnie
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Alan
Carmichael, Alistair
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Tom
Clarke, rh Charles
Clegg, Nick
Clelland, David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, rh Robin
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim
Curtis-Thomas, Claire
Darling, rh Alistair
Davey, Edward
David, Wayne
Davidson, Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Dhanda, Parmjit
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Maria
Eagle, Angela
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Featherstone, Lynne
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Peter
Hall, Mike
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, David
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Tom
Harris, Dr. Evan
Havard, Dai
Healey, John
Heath, David
Henderson, Doug
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, rh Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, David
Howarth, George
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon
Hughes, rh Beverley
Huhne, Chris
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, rh Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Dr. Lynne
Jones, Martyn
Jones, Kevan
Jones, Helen
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Ms Barbara
Keen, Ann
Keen, Alan
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khabra, Piara
Khan, Sadiq
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Knight, Jim
Kramer, Susan
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, David
Law, Peter
Laws, David
Laxton, Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, John
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Dr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Khalid
Malik, Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Marshall, David
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
McAvoy, rh Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, Edward
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moore, Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Paul
Murphy, Denis
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget
Prentice, Gordon
Prescott, rh John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Purnell, James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Nick
Reed, Jamie

Reed, Andy
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rogerson, Dan
Rooney, Terry
Rowen, Paul
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine
Russell, Bob
Ryan, Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Short, rh Clare
Simon, Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Slaughter, Andrew
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Andrew
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, Ms Angela, *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dari
Taylor, Matthew
Teather, Sarah
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, Ms Emily
Thurso, John
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Robert N.
Watson, Tom
Watts, Dave
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Stephen
Williams, Mark
Williams, Betty
Williams, rh Alan
Willis, Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wright, Anthony
Wright, Iain
Wright, David
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Tony Cunningham and Mr. Frank Roy

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Peter
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, rh James
Bacon, Richard
Bellingham, Henry
Benyon, Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Brian
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Peter
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Mrs. Angela
Burns, Simon
Burrowes, David
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cameron, David
Carswell, Douglas
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cox, Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Curry, rh David
Davies, Quentin
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Jonathan
Dodds, Nigel
Dorrell, rh Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Iain
Dunne, Philip
Ellwood, Tobias
Evans, Nigel
Evennett, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Mark
Forth, rh Eric
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gauke, David
Gibb, Nick
Goodman, Paul
Goodwill, Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, rh John
Hammond, Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, Mark
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hesford, Stephen
Hoban, Mark
Hogg, rh Douglas
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Horam, John
Howard, rh Michael
Howarth, Gerald
Hunt, Jeremy
Hurd, Nick
Jack, rh Michael
Jackson, Stewart
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Boris
Jones, David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Julie
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Ian
Lilley, rh Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, rh Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Rev. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Malcolm
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Stephen
Osborne, George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pelling, Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Eric
Price, Adam
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, John
Redwood, rh John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, David
Scott, Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shephard, Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Keith
Simpson, David
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stuart, Graham
Swayne, Desmond
Swire, Hugo
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Edward
Vara, Shailesh
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Wallace, Ben
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Mike
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, David
Williams, Hywel
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregory Barker and Mr. Mark Prisk

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House endorses the Statement of 6th June by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, which set out the Government's response to the results of the French and Dutch referenda on the EU Constitutional Treaty; recognises that

discussions will now take place on the future of the Constitutional Treaty between European leaders collectively; and agrees that the EU should uphold the concept of subsidiarity and pursue greater flexibility and better regulation, and continue the contribution it has made to peace, democracy and prosperity over recent decades for the benefit of the people of Europe.

DEREGULATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1) (Consideration of draft regulatory reform orders),

Regulatory Reform

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Execution of Deeds and Documents) Order 2005, which was laid before this House on 21st February, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Cawsey.]*

Question agreed to.

Briseham Unit, Brixham

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Cawsey.]*

7.31 pm

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) (Con): I am delighted to have this opportunity to raise a matter of considerable concern to the people of Devon. I am concerned that the Devon Partnership NHS trust, with its budget of £85 million this year, may not place the care of patients as the priority. I am concerned about the total absence of day care facilities in Brixham for Alzheimer's and dementia sufferers since the unilateral closure of the Briseham unit on 20 December 2004. I am concerned about the lack of available NHS respite care, which is forcing those who look after very sick people to pay for their own respite provision out of their own pockets. I am concerned that we are not facing up to the reality that, as our population gets older, more people will need mental health care and that the NHS must be equipped to cope with the rapid increase in demand.

There are more than 750,000 people in the UK with dementia. The vast majority are over 65 and the incidence of dementia increases with age—one in 20 people over 65 have dementia, which increases to one in five among people over 80. My constituency has the 13th largest proportion of pensionable citizens and there are approximately 1,155 people with dementia in the area. They are among the most vulnerable people in our society. Dementia does not just leave sufferers with failing memories—as the condition worsens, many people cannot feed, bathe or dress themselves. Dementia is a forgotten disease. One carer said:

"This cruel disease does not just affect one person—it has affected everyone we come into contact with. It has forced an end to my husband's career; it has affected my career quite dramatically. It has changed our standard of living and our lifestyle. It has changed everything we have lived and worked for."

One carer, describing her father's condition, wrote:

"I found my father's frustration and anger terribly distressing. He cried in the world he didn't understand. He got lost in his own bungalow and was frightened of his own reflection in the mirror."

As medical advances lengthen our life expectancy, the proportion of our population with dementia and requiring the support of the mental health services will increase. The problems presented by an ageing population are much discussed in relation to pension provision, but we are yet properly to address what it means in terms of the changing demands placed on our health services, particularly our mental health services. It is estimated that, by 2010, there will be 870,000 people with dementia in the UK. That is the same as the population of Manchester and Liverpool put together. In five years' time, there will be that number of people with dementia or Alzheimer's. By 2050, nearly 2 million people will have dementia or Alzheimer's. That will require a significant expansion of mental health service provision and availability of day and residential care.

Since 2001, the care and treatment for those with dementia in my constituency has been the responsibility of the Devon Partnership NHS trust, which provides mental health and learning disability services to the population of Devon. There is a staff of 2,800 and in 2004–05, it spent approximately £80 million. One of its problems is the absurd position whereby it is funded by

[Mr. Anthony Steen]

nine different sources. There are therefore nine paymasters—seven primary care trusts in Devon and Torbay, Torbay unitary authority and Devon county council. That makes for unnecessary problems with priorities and management. Will the Under-Secretary investigate how to simplify the funding arrangement?

In the 2005–06 financial year, the trust budget has been significantly increased, with Devon county council alone increasing its contribution to nearly £1 million, yet front-line service provision is often incoherent, unequal throughout the county and seemingly not patient-driven. More money has not meant better services for the Alzheimer's and dementia sufferer.

The Briseham unit in my constituency provided specialist treatment and assessment services to those over 65 with dementia. The building was specifically designed for the purpose of caring for the elderly mentally ill. That made it an especially suitable environment, more so than wards that had not been specifically built for the purpose. It had 16 beds, as well as offering day care seven days a week and a small respite facility, which was fully utilised. It was unilaterally closed on Monday 20 December 2004, although the trust remains insistent that it has not been closed but simply suspended. It remains suspended six months later. As a member of staff who was at Briseham recently said to me:

"I cannot believe that they have closed a purpose built, secure unit with access to an enclosed garden for patients to wander freely, and left open a ward on the first floor of a hospital where it is very difficult to observe patients, where they have no freedom to move, and the only view they have is the top of cars and buses."

The unit did not provide long-term residential care but day care and respite care. It provided the essential back-up to allow carers to continue looking after their loved ones at home. As the majority of carers are the spouses of the person for whom they are caring, they are likely to be elderly. Carers can cope and continue their role only with appropriate support. If they fall ill or cannot provide all the necessary care, sufficient respite and day care must be available. If it is lacking, everybody suffers, and people with dementia will need full-time residential care at the cost of millions to the taxpayer.

The chief executive of the Devon Partnership NHS trust personally told me that he intended to wait until the Sainsbury centre for mental health published its report on "Future Development of Mental Health Services for Older People" in Devon before deciding about any change in the services that Briseham provided. Instead, he did the opposite. He closed the unit before the publication of the report, which came out in January, but to which the trust has still not responded. In a letter following the closure of Briseham, Mr. Tulley, the chief executive, stated:

"I think it is obvious that the day services were extremely valued and some form of day care in Brixham should continue."

So why has it not continued?

What happened after Briseham was closed reminds us that administrative decisions have a genuine and profound impact on people's lives. A few patients were offered care at the Harborne unit in Totnes, which is at least a 30-minute drive away. Such is the stress and strain of the journey that some patients have had to be medicated. However, the majority of people who previously received day and respite care at Briseham have been offered no alternative care by Devon Partnership NHS trust since it suspended the unit.

Mr. Gosling of Brixham is 85 this month. He devotedly cares for his wife who has Alzheimer's. When Briseham was open, he could count on it to provide day care when he needed time off, for example, to go to the dentist. In addition, the unit would care for his wife once every four weeks—the only respite Mr. Gosling got. Since Briseham was closed, Mr. and Mrs. Gosling have had to pay for respite care elsewhere. They have had to spend more than £1,000 of their hard-earned money for that purpose as the Devon Partnership NHS trust has offered them no alternative care. Mr. Gosling cannot understand how the powers that be could be so inhuman as to wipe out something that people need and rely upon, and that the NHS has a duty to provide.

Mr. Barber of Higher Furzeham road, Brixham is 77 and cares for his wife, who has been battling with Alzheimer's for 10 years. Before its closure, the Briseham unit provided day care on a four-day-a-week basis for him, as well as residential care for a couple of days when Mr. Barber was unwell or unable to care for his wife. Since it closed, no day care has been available for Mrs. Barber and, at a meeting of the Devon Partnership NHS trust, Mr. Barber was told that the other units that provided care for elderly people with mental health problems were unable to care for his wife, even if he could not do so through illness or for other reasons, as they were already seriously overloaded.

Mrs. Bovey of Golden close, Brixham cares for her husband, who has progressive supranuclear palsy. She cannot even pop out to get a pint of milk or loaf of bread unless someone can stay with him as he needs round-the-clock care. Prior to the closure of the Briseham unit, he had day care there two days a week and a week's respite care roughly every four weeks. Mrs. Bovey says that that was her "lifeline". She was never offered alternative care in any other unit. It is only in the past few weeks that social services, not the Devon Partnership NHS trust, have come forward with an offer of some respite care, yet Mr. Tulley, the chief executive, gave me a personal assurance that everyone who used Briseham is better off under the new arrangements.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): The hon. Gentleman read out names of his constituents. There are constituents of mine who also depend on that unit. If we are in an age where people are living longer and getting older, will not demands be even greater than they are at present? Does he share my feeling that the plans that are being talked about for the future of mental health care services do not take into consideration the needs of those who require support at such a centre, or of those who need respite in order that their loved ones are cared for while they have some time out?

Mr. Steen: The hon. Gentleman could not have put it better. He and I share the bay—he has slightly more of it than me—and we are of one mind about the matter. Mental health services must be led not by what the administrators want but by what the patients and the carers need. I am grateful for that intervention.

In a letter that Mr. Tulley wrote to me on 5 January, he said:

"I accept entirely that the current uncertainty is unhelpful to families of sufferers".

But he has done nothing about it. The chief executive also refers to the closure of Briseham as a "short-term decision." Six months later and we are no further forward.

In the letter of 5 January, the chief executive admitted:

"There has been no consultation in relation to the suspension of the service"

at Briseham. It is not just the Member of Parliament who was not consulted but the staff, the patients, the carers, the Devon Partnership patient and public forum, Devon county council and the Torbay unitary authority, the later two having scrutinising responsibilities. How can the trust justify failing to consult the interested parties before taking such a monumental decision, which has devastated so many of my constituents' lives?

What is the point of the Government setting up a consultation and scrutiny mechanism if it is totally disregarded? Does not the Minister agree that the behaviour of the trust leaves much to be desired and that it must put its consultation process in order? The manner of Briseham's closure and the lack of consultation give weight to allegations that the trust behaves in an autocratic, cavalier and even bullying way, rather than as a responsible public body.

Consultation has been prolific over whether to reopen the unit, which has so far taken six months without any conclusion. Why is it that the unit can be closed summarily and without consultation, abandoning patients and carers, but cannot be reopened without endless committee meetings? It seems that services can be suspended at speed but that reinstating them is a painstaking process.

The trust conveniently forgets that it cannot put on hold the debilitating effects of the disease while it debates the future. I believe the Torbay unitary authority's health scrutiny committee will produce a critical report later this month, which will quite rightly draw attention to the failures of the trust in a number of important areas, particularly in relation to the closure of Briseham.

One constituent of mine who received day care at Briseham before its closure was given no alternative care immediately following the closure of the unit, and his wife had to look after him unassisted for seven weeks until an alternative unit was able to provide some help. Sadly, he has since died. It is simply not acceptable that, in the last few months of a person's life, when they need care most—and the health trust knows that they need it most—care is unilaterally withdrawn, and their life is made worse, not to mention that of the carer. Their lives are callously turned upside down without any regard to the impact. The worst thing is that, too often, the administrators are not taken to task for that because the people hit hardest by their actions are those least able to speak up for themselves. Few believe the reasons given by Devon Partnership NHS trust as to why Briseham was closed and the trust has not been forthcoming with a detailed explanation that fits with the reality.

The whole area of mental health still suffers from public suspicion and distrust. A key step in overcoming it is for the mental health authorities to be more open about the way that they run their organisations. There needs to be transparency not just in the decision-making process, but in day-to-day operations. We should never forget that those who rely on mental health services are the most vulnerable and confused people who are the least able to say what they want for themselves. That is made even more unacceptable by virtue of the fact that those who rely on mental health services, for whom the partnership is supposed to provide, are sometimes extremely confused. They need their carers listened to and they need to be heard.

I ask the Secretary of State to review the running of the Devon Partnership NHS trust, its decision to close the Briseham unit, the manner in which the decision was made, current scrutiny procedures and the failure to provide day care facilities in Brixham—with 18,000 people, it is the largest town in my constituency—for people with dementia.

I believe that the Government are planning a new approach to care for elderly people with mental health problems whereby responsibility will switch from health to social services. That will enable the providers of services to charge for whatever they offer, which could mean Alzheimer's patients and their carers being squeezed of every penny piece until the pips squeak. Everyone will be means-tested. If a carer needs respite care, he will have to pay for it, and the Minister will appreciate that many carers will not be able to afford it and will be forced to give up caring and put the patient back into the health service, along with the accompanying additional costs. Have the Government not realised that the consequence of their penny-pinching approach towards those least able to fend for themselves will be disastrous? Furthermore, it is rumoured that the Government's position that dementia and Alzheimer's are no longer to be treated as an illness, but as a condition, may result in health care for people with those diseases no longer being free at the point of delivery.

Carers save the state millions of pounds by providing care that the state would otherwise have to provide. That should be remembered when arguments about the cost of facilities for people with dementia are being bandied about. It is vital that the carer's desire to look after their loved ones is not exploited by the state as a way to avoid responsibility for looking after people with serious mental health problems.

Yesterday, I met the chairman, chief executive and chief nursing officer of the partnership trust. I have no doubt that their intentions are good and that they wish to do the best they can for those with mental illnesses in Devon, but they are going about it in a very strange way. If they are to win back the confidence of not just myself, but very many others, they will need to prove that they do provide people with the front-line services that the patients—not the administrators—need and deserve, with the £85 million budget that they have at their disposal.

The trust was at pains to point out that the type of support for people with dementia is increasingly focused on support in the home rather than in special units, but there is still a need for day respite services, as carers often want some time to themselves in their own home. Briseham provided that with its day-care facilities and the popularity of the service speaks for itself. People with Alzheimer's often benefit from mixing with other

[Mr. Steen]

people in a different environment, particularly one where medical treatment for any ailments can be provided immediately. I am not entirely convinced that the evidence bears out the trust's suggestion that care in the home is preferable to care in a specialist unit. It is not an either or situation: both are needed.

We are the fourth richest economy in the world, so it is simply not acceptable that, with the resources and skills available, we treat those in desperate need of support so badly. How society treats its elderly and vulnerable is a most significant reflection of its values. There are too many public bodies in Britain whose employees feel unaccountable to anybody other than their immediate superiors—certainly not to the people whom they are meant to be serving. Some of those bodies behave like third-world dictatorships rather than publicly accountable and socially responsible organisations.

Will the Minister ensure that she takes a very close look at the Devon Partnership NHS trust and makes a clear and unequivocal statement as to the future of the Briseham unit in Brixham, what facilities will be available in Brixham for people with Alzheimer's, what respite facilities will be available for carers and what domiciliary care and home facilities will be on call? The testimonies of carers of people who were cared for at the Briseham unit show that it was a hugely valued and vital resource for people coping with incredibly difficult situations. The way the Devon Partnership NHS trust has behaved cries out for an explanation. Perhaps the Minister can make some suggestions as to how it can move forward with the support of the entire community.

7.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Caroline Flint): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on securing today's debate and I welcome other Members whose presence this evening shows that they have concerns about this matter.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we must ensure that the needs and choices of older people—especially those with mental health difficulties—and of their carers are central to the services that they receive. We must ensure that they are able to play as full a part as possible in society, that their dignity is respected and that their independence protected. That is the central theme of the Green Paper entitled "Independence, Wellbeing and Choice", which is currently out for consultation. We hope that that will be a key driver in ensuring that people at the greatest risk of losing their independence will receive the services and care that they need.

I know from his speech this evening that the hon. Gentleman cares passionately and deeply about facilities for sufferers from dementia and Alzheimer's. In his role as a constituency MP, he has clearly taken a very keen interest in those matters for a long time, and not just over recent months. I listened carefully to the concerns that he raised.

I want to pay tribute too to all the staff working in this field around the country. It is a highly specialised area, and the work can be very stressful, as it involves dealing with dementia and Alzheimer's sufferers and their families. The hon. Gentleman made it very clear that whole families are affected by the impact of those conditions on their loved ones.

I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are committed to improving the standard of care for those with dementia, and we have made available significant additional investment in order to achieve that. Indeed, more money than ever before is being invested in older people's services, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that we must look to the future and take into consideration the fact that the additional investment in health care means that people will live longer, as well as the possibility that they may therefore develop dementia. We must keep our planning of services under constant review.

The hon. Gentleman drew a portrait of his area, and was right to say that needs are different in different communities, depending on the size of the elderly population. The Government can set priorities and frameworks beneath which standards of care should not fall, but we must also recognise that it would be ludicrous to plan every service in all communities. That would be an example of the dead hand of Government, so we must make sure that local services—the PCTs and strategic health authorities—play their part in the development of services, in consultation with service providers and, importantly, local communities and patients and their carers.

The Government recently announced the latest round of revenue allocations to PCTs, covering the period 2006–07 to 2007–08. Those allocations represent an investment of £135 billion investment in the NHS, with £64 billion going to PCTs in 2006–07 and £70 billion in 2007–08.

As the majority of users of the NHS are older people—two thirds of all those in hospital at any time are over the age of 65—they will benefit in particular. In the hon. Gentleman's constituency, the South Hams and West Devon PCT will receive an increase of £19.7 million, or 17 per cent., for 2006–07 to 2007–08. Torbay PCT, which also serves some of his constituents, will receive an increase of £39.5 million for the same period.

In 2002, the Government announced an additional £1 billion for social services over three years from 2003–04 to 2005–06, to be invested in a range of initiatives to improve care for all older people. Overall, the Government have also announced total adult personal services funding of £11.5 billion for local authorities in 2005–06. That represents an overall increase in resources of around £850 million, or 5.6 per cent in real terms, when compared with 2004–05. That shows the steady progress being made by the Government in boosting the resources available in this sector.

The Government also recognise that older people with dementia need and deserve better services, and we have set in place a number of initiatives to ensure that they get them. We published a national service framework for older people in March 2001 to promote good mental health in older people, and higher-quality treatment and support for those with dementia and depression.

To build on the improvements we have already seen as a result of the national service framework for older people, the national clinical directors of older people's services and mental health services are helping to develop a vision of future mental health services for

older people, together with a plan of action to help us realise that vision. That will help us nationally, but it should also help those planning local services. It will be launched in the near future.

Before I respond to the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the Briseham unit, it is important to note that all primary care trusts in Devon are reviewing how older people's mental health services are delivered and how they can be improved. As he will be aware, the Devon older people's strategic partnership, Torbay PCT and Torbay council commissioned the Sainsbury centre for mental health to look into the provision of mental health services for older people. The findings, which were published in December 2004, are being used to inform local planning.

The Sainsbury centre review outlined a number of key principles that it suggested needed to underpin services for older people in Devon, including more emphasis on community care and more support for service users and carers in their own home. However, I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman made. It is not a question of either/or, but of getting the balance right with a mixture of both sorts of care.

Work is now under way locally to draw up a pan-Devon commissioning strategy and drive forward the implementation of the report's recommendations. I understand that the strategic health authority is considering some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised in relation to funding and commissioning. I hope that he will engage in that process as it considers some of the complications caused by streams of funding to improve matters for the future. I understand that the group taking forward the pan-Devon commissioning strategy hopes to meet later this month, and it is anticipated that a strategy will be ready within the next two months. I urge hon. Members to make contact with their local area, if they have not done so already, to find out what is happening in that regard. In Torbay, the PCT has already developed a commissioning strategy that maps out the way forward for local mental health services, creating a service that is local, accessible and provides continuity of care for all.

I turn now to the specific issue of the Briseham unit. The hon. Gentleman is aware that the Devon partnership trust has decided that the services at Briseham unit will be decommissioned, and I understand that a public announcement will be made tomorrow. I know that the hon. Gentleman has had meetings this week that have informed him of that. I am assured that the trust has done all it can to ensure that the impact of the closure of the Briseham unit on service users, carers and their families has been kept to a minimum. I heard what the hon. Gentleman said this evening about individuals, and I will ensure that the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who has responsibility for that matter, is aware of the issues that he has raised tonight.

When the trust suspended the service in December last year, it made sure that alternative arrangements were made for all users of the service. The unit offered a mixture of in-bed facilities, day care and respite care. Some 19 beds were available, but the usage of those beds had fallen considerably, which raised questions about sustainability and the quality of clinical care. I understand the local community mental health team has been working closely with social services to ensure that the transfer of patients has been as smooth as possible and I am advised that service users who previously received residential respite care at Briseham are now being cared for at the Harbourne unit in Totnes, as the hon. Gentleman said. I understand his point about the journey time, and that and other important issues will have to be considered when it comes to future arrangements.

As a temporary measure, patients who received day care at Briseham were initially transferred to the Chadwell centre in Paignton and the trust is now in the process of finding patients appropriate day care in social care facilities or the independent sector.

I assure hon. Members that the decision to close the Briseham unit is not about saving money. Currently, the Devon partnership trust is working up a model of care for services in south Devon that supports the principles and recommendations set out in the Sainsbury review. That model will help to ensure that more people have access to local services, and it will see that the £780,000 currently invested at Briseham is redirected into enhanced, integrated services at the community level. Those services will include the establishment of fully integrated, co-located community mental health teams, and a community matron. An in-patient service will continue to be provided at the Fernworthy unit on the Torbay hospital site, which offers 24-hour admission for individuals in need of in-patient care. The new model of care will also include a team of community support workers located with, and managed by, the community team.

One of the concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman was the provision of respite care. That is a key priority for the NHS locally, and I understand that the trust is actively exploring options to develop more provision in social services and independent residential and nursing care homes to boost the amount of respite care available in different communities.

I understand that one option for the future use of the Briseham unit might include the transfer of services currently provided at Brixham hospital. Although only a proposal at this stage, it demonstrates the commitment locally to look at ways in which the Briseham unit can be used in the future. I understand that Torbay PCT will be making an announcement about plans for the future use of Briseham at its next board meeting on 29 June.

The hon. Gentleman made several points about consultation. I am advised that the issues relating to the Briseham unit were discussed with patients, staff and carers before closure, but he has made his point this evening and I am sure that it will be heard by the trust and others locally. I hope that I have taken his remarks into consideration and I do not underestimate for a moment his sincere concerns about the future of older people's mental services in his area. Often, such issues are hidden; families often feel uncomfortable talking about them in public because of the impact of dementia and Alzheimer's on their loved ones. We have to find a way—

The motion having been made after Seven o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 9 June 2005

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Biofuels

1. **Mr. Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What discussions she has had with the farming industry about biofuels. [2600]

The Minister for Climate Change and the Environment (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Department has had a number of discussions, both at ministerial and official level, with a wide range of stakeholders, including the National Farmers Union, the Country Land and Business Association and biofuel trade associations, which include farming industry representatives, individual farmers and agricultural businesses.

Mr. Dunne: Why do the Government not encourage farming diversification and renewable energy production by offering comparable non-fossil fuel support to farmers producing biomass and biofuel crops, instead of supporting more environmentally contentious diversification such as onshore wind farms?

Mr. Morley: There are not many farmers involved in onshore wind farm businesses, although some receive a rental income from them. There is a range of diversification available to farmers, in which biofuels play an important part. Farmers are allowed to grow biofuel crops on set-aside land, for example, and a 20p reduction in fuel duty is available to encourage the use of biofuels. We are also considering other measures to encourage their use, including a potential biofuel obligation on oil companies. About £50 million is also available to encourage the development of biofuels.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): In his discussions on this matter, has my right hon. Friend talked to the Department for Transport and the Treasury? I hope that he will accept that, without further policy instruments, a further reduction in excise duty and the speedy introduction of the road transport renewable fuel obligations, the industry will not take off in this country. Is he worried about the import of Brazilian biofuels?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are in close talks with the Department for Transport, the Treasury and other Departments. He will be aware that we are currently engaged in the climate change review, which is considering a range of options, including biofuels and the ways in which we can promote them. We have seen some successful experiments involving coal-fired power stations burning coppice willow, for example, which I very much welcome. His point about structuring the support to encourage the production of biofuels in this country, rather than encouraging imports, is also a good one.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): We are aware that biofuels are a sustainable mechanism for avoiding climate change. We are also aware that the Government are committed to avoiding climate change and therefore do not wish to see a massive increase in the use of fossil fuels. However, they are also committed to a substantial increase in air travel. What proportion of the increase in fuel consumption by air traffic will come from biofuels?

Mr. Morley: Let us draw a distinction in relation to the expansion of air travel. It is not being encouraged by the Government; it is a fact of life that we have to react to and take into account. The hon. Gentleman might be aware that we are pressing for the inclusion of aviation in the European carbon trading scheme, which will represent an important way of controlling emissions. Biofuels have a wide range of applications, and aviation is one of them, although we should not exaggerate their use in that way, because of the amount of land needed for biofuel production. However, it has enormous potential. The Government have set up a taskforce chaired by Sir Ben Gill to examine the role of biofuels and agriculture, which will give us important advice on how we take this issue forward.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): Is not the distribution network one of the problems in respect of biodiesel? My hon. Friend will know that the network is heavily skewed towards the eastern part of the country, and that it is virtually impossible for those living in Greater Manchester and the north-west region to gain access to a biodiesel station. Will his Department talk to the manufacturers and distributors to ensure a more evenly balanced distribution network across the United Kingdom?

Mr. Morley: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a long and close interest in biofuels. There is a garage in my village that sells biodiesel—which I use, incidentally—but I am aware that that is not typical of the whole country. However, I am pleased to say that, as part of the approach to encouraging biofuels, a factory has been established in Scotland to produce biofuel, and a further factory is under construction in Teesside that will have a considerable capacity for producing biofuel. However, we need the distribution network as well. We need the manufacture and the distribution in place to encourage its use—a well-to-wheel approach, so to speak.

Mr. Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): The Minister has talked about instruments to encourage the production of biofuel. The other side of the equation, however, is

the use of biofuel. Given that previous grants for the conversion of lorries, in particular, to greener fuels have had to be withdrawn, what measures will he take to encourage the use of greener fuels and biofuel, particularly by the road haulage industry?

Mr. Morley: New EU regulation is to be introduced in relation to heavy good vehicles involving their manufacturing and emissions, which will improve the situation considerably. The big advantage of biodiesel is that engines do not need to be adapted to use it: conventional diesel engines can run on it, which is one of its great strengths.

Single Payment Scheme

2. **Mr. Edward Garnier** (Harborough) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to make interim payments to farmers who have yet to receive the single farm payment. [2601]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): Payments under the single payment scheme are forecast to begin in February 2006, which is well within the regulatory window ending on 30 June 2006. We have not ruled out the possibility of making an advance payment, but there are real legal and practical difficulties in doing so, and we would not wish to take any action that would delay the main payment.

Mr. Garnier: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, but, of course, farmers in my constituency are not so much concerned about regulatory windows as cash flow. In the first quarter of this year, farming debt in the United Kingdom stood at about £8.46 billion. Cash flow in the depressed agricultural economy is vital, and it seems to me essential that the Government do more than wait until February 2006 to help out hard-pressed farmers. I hope that she will provide me with better news.

Margaret Beckett: We are very conscious of the cash-flow issues for the farming community, which is why, as I have reported to the House previously, we have had discussions with the banks about some of the implications. Equally, however, while I know and am sensitive to the concerns of those who will not receive payment before February, a genuine balance is to be struck between trying to do something to ease that difficulty and doing something that would delay the main payment, as that, too, could cause cash-flow and other problems. We keep the issue under continual review, however.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept that farming throughout the United Kingdom has faced tremendous challenges over the past few years, especially given the number of crises that it has faced? Is it not therefore vital that the Department is speedy in getting money out to farmers? Cash flow is just as much a major problem in Northern Ireland as in any other part of the United Kingdom. Will she encourage the Department to get the money out as quickly as possible rather than at the last moment as that makes farming more difficult?

Margaret Beckett: I completely understand and sympathise with the point that the hon. Gentleman is also making. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) raised the issue of making sure that payments are made and keeping on top of the issue. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that there are very frequent meetings to maintain pressure, update and try to be absolutely sure that we deal with the issue as speedily as possible. The whole House recognises, however, that we are in the first year of establishing what will ultimately make for a much simpler and, I hope, easily managed system. Changing to a completely new system is always difficult.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that not only this system but others that she has in mind, such as under the water framework directive, depend very much on farmers' support and understanding, and that the farming community currently has a very low regard for its relationships not only with the top of her Department but right the way down it, for which there are all sorts of reasons? Can she consider carefully ways of using farm payments so that farmers see that she listens and understands what their problems are; otherwise, I fear that there will be a knock-on effect for all the other things that she wants to do? There is a lack of confidence and support, and she must try to do something about it.

Margaret Beckett: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point, and I know that he has much experience in these issues. All I can say is that although, as he says, there are many short-term difficulties, he will know that the Department has embarked on a major reorganisation of the Rural Payments Agency and is now introducing a new system on top of that precisely because we understand the difficulties that people experience. I am confident, however, that what farmers want in every part of the United Kingdom is a system that will ultimately be simpler, more efficient and effective, and that will result in fewer forms, fewer inspections and less of the bureaucratic burden of which they, like every other business community, complain, and understandably so.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): No one would disagree with the Secretary of State's words. The problem is that the reality is somewhat different. Having just come up against the RPA and animal welfare office in trying to register my new sow, Maud, I can now empathise with the frustrations felt by farmers up and down the country. The reality is that the computer system used by the RPA is simply not up to it, and the animal welfare office to which I spoke asked weepingly whether I would raise the issue in Parliament, which I am now doing. What we and farmers up and down the country face is confusion over the next year until the Secretary of State gets a grip and sorts out the RPA system.

Margaret Beckett: It is precisely because we are sorting out the RPA system—which in itself is bound to cause difficulties—and, on top of that, implementing a new system that, understandably, there are problems and concerns. I entirely understand the anxiety that is being expressed.

Since all I hear from Conservative Members are complaints, let me point out that the proposal announced by them at the general election to cut £118 million from the RPA's funding was unlikely to have helped.

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): That is certainly true, but does the Secretary of State recognise that there is significant concern about the operation of the RPA? What plans has she to investigate complaints from farmers who have received inaccurate forms and maps from the agency? Accurate forms and maps are vital if farmers are to claim the support to which they are entitled. Does the Secretary of State understand the low esteem in which the agency is held and the impact that this is having on farmers, and indeed on how her Department is perceived?

Margaret Beckett: I do understand that, but before we leave the issue it is only right for me to put on record that the RPA has found itself with an inadequate and unsuitable system. That system is being reformed and modernised, which involves an enormous amount of work. The RPA's staff have tried tremendously hard: like all Members of Parliament, they understand the difficulties faced by farmers.

To an extent—a small extent, perhaps—this is a two-way street. The RPA is trying to produce accurate maps that will form the basis of payments in future. There has been a 700 per cent. increase in the number of changes that have had to be made to maps that were originally drawn up on the basis of existing information. No one anticipated that. One reason for it is that farmers are now notifying the agency, literally in some cases, of parcels of land that have never been registered. Legally, they should have been registered under the previous payment system. Because a basis is being established for a system that will run well into the future, there are bound to be teething problems. There have been more than were expected, so the RPA has used extra staff and made staff work extra hours, including weekends, to tackle them. The situation is not easy for anyone, but we are working hard to deal with it.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): With respect, what the Secretary of State says is wrong. There was no obligation for landowners to register land if they were not seeking to claim integrated administration and control scheme money, headage payments or payments under a stewardship scheme. The problem has been caused partly by the fact that the Secretary of State changed the scheme and allowed registration of a lot of different land, such as land used for equestrian purposes.

The Secretary of State referred to payment by February. Her own published targets show that the Department does not expect the bulk of payments to be made until next March. To her credit, in the past she has shown barely concealed anger at the delays, but when she talks of a simplified system does she understand the huge anger in the farming industry? Does she realise how thin her case sounds when farmers know that farmers in other EU countries such as Germany are issued with forms a fraction of the size of those issued here? The German form has seven pages, whereas the English form has 17.

Will the Secretary of State give an absolute assurance that no penalties will be imposed on farmers who could not complete their forms on time, or did so inaccurately, because they did not receive the correct information from the RPA?

Mr. Speaker: Order. Perhaps in future questions could be cut a bit.

Margaret Beckett: I take the point made by the hon. Gentleman. Of course land should not necessarily have been registered in quite the same way as it must be registered now. I am afraid, however, that there are parcels of land that should indeed have been registered in the past. We are not pursuing the matter, but the fact is that all that has greatly complicated the RPA's work.

The hon. Gentleman said that I had displayed barely concealed anger. I do not think that the anger was concealed at all, actually. I can assure the House that neither I nor any member of my ministerial team wanted to have to come here and say that we would be unable to begin making payments at the very start of the payment date.

The hon. Gentleman says that in other member states the forms are simpler. They may be in some cases, but the systems are not necessarily simpler and in fact we are not comparing like with like. In Germany, for example, there is a different structure and system in each Länder. We published what we hoped would be the payment dates, and we published the new date as soon as we knew that it would have to be a little later, to try to give people at least some long-term planning certainty. Many other member states that have not publicly commented on their payment dates are experiencing exactly the same difficulties as us.

EU Sugar Regime

3. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): If she will make a statement on proposed reforms to the EU sugar regime. [2602]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): Proposals for reform of the EU sugar regime are not due to be announced until 22 June.

Miss McIntosh: I thank the Secretary of State for that perhaps less than full reply. She will join me in recognising the importance of sugar beet as a break crop and a rotation crop, particularly in constituencies such as Vale of York. What assessment has been made of the impact of these reforms on UK producers? Following the expected publication of the EU proposals on 22 June, what consultations will there be with UK producers and other interested parties on the further impact on them of those EU reforms?

Margaret Beckett: We are on slightly tenuous ground here because, as I said, the proposals have not yet been published, although—

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): They were leaked.

Margaret Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that ideas have been leaked, but whether what has been leaked is wholly accurate remains to be seen. We did in fact carry out an assessment and looked at a range of options, precisely because no one could—and still cannot—be entirely sure exactly what package the Commission will come up with. The assessment was carried out by Cambridge university and the Royal Agricultural College, and it has been published on my Department's website. The range of possible options was considered, and the primary conclusion was that any scenario for reform is likely to lead to less production in the UK, but that the impact would be significantly lessened if growers restructured, reduced their costs and so on. Issues such as the potential for substitution were also examined, and we will keep that assessment up to date as we see what proposals the Commission produces. I can assure the hon. Lady that just as we consulted on the initial proposals, we will certainly consult on the final proposals.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State assure us that, in making her representations to the Commission before the publication of its proposals on 22 June, the right balance was struck between the interests of EU consumers and those of producers outside the EU, who have suffered because of the subsidies provided by some member states?

Margaret Beckett: I can assure my hon. Friend that the impact of proposals for sugar reform on the wider world is very much part of the context of the discussions that have taken place not just in the UK, but in the EU as a whole. For example, as he will probably knows, the European Council invited leaders and representatives of the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to address it last year. I intend to hold a further such meeting with those representatives in September, when the position concerning the negotiations will be clearer. We are very mindful of this issue and, of course, such countries receive the prevailing EU price. But part of the reason why this reform is complex is that it is combined with the end of the existing regime, with the introduction of the "Everything but Arms" agreement, and with a range of other impinging issues.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that probably more sugar beet is grown in west Norfolk than in any other part of the country, and that much of it is grown not just by large farmers but by many small farmers, including county council smallholders? Is she also aware that if these proposals go ahead, the average profit per hectare will come down to £4.30? All these farmers appreciate the need for change, but is there not a way in which we can protect the interests of very small farmers?

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, and I am, of course, conscious of both the way in which such growing is concentrated in certain areas and the fact that many small producers are involved, as he rightly says. I can assure him that the overall impact will indeed be very much part of the assessment, and I am sure that the whole European Council will wish that to be the case. Of course, whatever changes are proposed, people will look at what adjustments can be made—compensatory measures and so on—and I feel confident that that will be an important part of those discussions.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments regarding sugar growers outside the EU. What advice can she give to me so that I can respond to my stepdaughter-in-law, who is from Nyeri in Kenya and tells me that many farmers in that part of Kenya have been put out of business owing to EU sugar subsidies? Not only are they put out of business, but whole communities are being destroyed and the sugar refinery has closed. They are not seeking aid; they simply want fair trade.

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the possible impact. Of course, this issue is not confined to sugar. Sugar is just the worst example of the way in which the subsidies that have been paid in developed countries in the past—not only in the EU, but in the United States, for example—have distorted the patterns of world trade and done great harm. Indeed, some interesting figures show that there are costs to taxpayers and consumers in the EU and costs elsewhere in the world as a result of the level as well as the nature of those subsidies. I can assure my hon. Friend that that is one of the reasons that drive us to pursue reform.

Mr. Letwin: The Secretary of State has said that she will see the representatives of the ACP countries in the autumn. I welcome that, but she will be as aware as we are—some Labour Members appear not to be aware of this—that the reform of the sugar regime, while inevitable, will have a shock effect on the signatories to the sugar agreement that are ACP countries. What steps is she taking, together with the Secretary of State for International Development, the Chancellor and other EU countries, to try to ensure that the timing of the restructuring of EU aid is such that those countries can weather that shock?

Margaret Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point, and I support it entirely. I can assure him that it is part of those discussions. What is perhaps not so much in the public domain is that, when the Commission publishes its proposals for reform on 22 June, I understand that it will also publish an action plan alongside them, so that we will be able to assess the timing and impact of the reform not only on producers from west Norfolk and elsewhere in the EU, but on other trading partners. That will be an important part of those discussions.

I neglected to say that, when we held the meeting with the ACP representatives, the Commission was represented by the Trade Commissioner, the Agriculture Commissioner and the Development Commissioner. I certainly hope that they will also all be in attendance when we meet the ACP representatives again, and such matters are part of that collective discussion.

Mr. Letwin: That is good news, and we look forward to seeing that happen.

Turning back to the UK producers that my hon. Friends have mentioned, while we accept that they are among the most effective sugar producers in Europe and

that— subject to successful negotiations with British Sugar, with which I hope that the Secretary of State will help—many of them will weather the storm, does she accept that their prospects, as well as those for reducing carbon emissions, would significantly improve if the Government were to take active steps to emulate the French and the US in encouraging bioethanol production, hence the growing of biofuel crops, in the UK?

Margaret Beckett: This reform has a whole range of possible impacts—not least, for example, on food manufacturers and confectioners, which provide many thousands of jobs in this country and elsewhere and the EU—although the right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that Britain is fortunate in being among the more efficient producers. However, I certainly agree that it is essential that we take into account the whole range of those issues. That will be very much part of those discussions. Of course, when the Agriculture Council discusses those issues, the UK chair will be taken by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw). He has heard all the observations and comments that have been made, and I am confident that he will follow them through.

Bovine Tuberculosis

4. **Mr. Ben Wallace** (Lancaster and Wyre) (Con): If she will make a statement on action to tackle bovine tuberculosis. [2603]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): We published our 10-year strategy for the control of bovine TB in March, and a copy is available in the Library of the House. I have today approved the first field trial of a TB vaccine for badgers and a new study by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency to prepare for similar field trials in cattle.

Mr. Wallace: The Minister has no doubt seen the report today from the university in his constituency that shows the harmful effects that bovine TB has had on farming and, indeed, on farmers, given the stress and loss of income that they are now suffering. In light of the successful trials on culling in Ireland—the results were out at the beginning of the year—will he finally consider allowing culling to go ahead and do so with some urgency?

Mr. Bradshaw: We are studying the results of the Irish trials with great care and are already carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of their implications, but I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that, as I am sure he is aware, the Irish Government have not changed their policy on culling as a result of the trials. They have not introduced proactive culling along the lines of those trials, because they do not believe that such a policy would be viable. For example, the trials involved the almost total extermination of badgers over quite large areas of the country.

The questions that we all need to ask ourselves are whether a badger-culling policy could be cost-effective, sustainable and viable. Those questions still have to be answered. I welcome the report from the university of Exeter. I have not yet had a chance to read it in full—it was published only yesterday—but I shall do so. From what I have heard of it, it sounds like an excellent report on a subject that we take very seriously.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): What progress has been made in the Krebs trials in hot spot areas such as Staffordshire, Moorlands? Have useful conclusions been reached in those trials and has my hon. Friend had time to consider the compensation regime for bovine TB in view of the substantial losses that some farmers face?

Mr. Bradshaw: The Krebs trials are progressing, although they are under the auspices of the Independent Scientific Group, which protects its independence very fiercely. It has assured Ministers that if there are any interim reports from the trials before they are due to end in the current culling season—that is this winter and early next year—it will let us know. It is important that we do not wait until the outcome of the Krebs trials. As the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace) has already suggested, we have interesting results from Ireland and we are already working on a cost-benefit analysis of those results.

On compensation, my hon. Friend will be aware that the independent implementation group on bovine TB, which is chaired by a livestock farmer, is considering the issue, and the Government believe that we need to do something about compensation levels following the National Audit Office report that was highly critical of overpayments in Wales.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Tomorrow at the Royal Cornwall show, the number of vets signed up to the February letter expressing total dissatisfaction with the Government's TB policy will rise to 420. These vets have more experience of TB than the Government's advisers and, if the disease is to be eradicated, they believe strongly that the Government must bear down on the disease both in cattle and in wildlife. Above all, the vets believe that there are very serious animal welfare implications in allowing large numbers of badgers to die of bovine TB. Why do the Government disagree with them?

Mr. Bradshaw: There is nothing to disagree with, because the letter from the vets did not make any practical suggestions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have written back to the vets who signed the hon. Gentleman's letter asking them for their practical suggestions as to what a badger-culling policy would look like. Perhaps the next time he stands up in the House, he will say what the badger-culling policy that he advocates would look like. One of the ludicrous suggestions that was made by his party during the general election campaign was that it would kill infected badgers. He must know that there is no reliable live test for TB in badgers, so we cannot tell whether a badger is infected until it is dead. His party's other suggestion that its policy would operate only when the badger setts could be repopulated with healthy badgers is also ludicrous, because there is no way of telling whether a badger has got TB until it is dead.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe) (Lab): Not for the first time, Conservative policy on rural affairs seems to be: if in doubt, kill something. Does my hon. Friend accept that the overwhelming majority of people who take an interest in the matter support a science and evidence-based approach that involves action only at the moment at which we feel that it will actually do some good?

Mr. Bradshaw: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The debate has moved on from the Conservative party's position to one about whether badger culling works. We *know from Ireland that that can work; the question* is whether it can be made cost-effective, sustainable and practicable. As my hon. Friend rightly says, any policy must be based on sound science and evidence, and as long as this Labour Government are in power, it will be.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall) (LD): Can the Minister tell us whether there are any plans whatsoever for the introduction of pre-movement testing and, if so, how that will be paid for?

Mr. Bradshaw: There are indeed plans for the introduction of pre-movement testing. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue because all too often the problem of cattle-to-cattle transmission of bovine TB and the extra measures that farmers can take on biosecurity are ignored in the debate, which is dominated by badgers. It is interesting that the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace), who tabled the question, comes from a part of the country that is virtually TB-free, because I think that there have been two outbreaks in Lancashire in the past five years. It is absolutely vital to keep the parts of the country that do not experience the terrible problem that we have in Devon, and which the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) experiences in Cornwall, free from TB. Pre-movement testing is an important tool within that policy.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): May I talk about the human impact among farmers of bovine TB? Staffordshire's rural emotional stress team—REST—is held up by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as an example of best practice in supporting people in rural locations who are isolated and suffer mental health problems or emotional difficulties. The team would confirm the same findings as the south-west study, and I can confirm from my personal experiences that farmers are positively suicidal when they see their whole herds destroyed because of bovine TB. I have watched bovine TB approach and take hold in my constituency, so I know how frustrating it is that the science is behind us. However, surely the March strategy is still too little to satisfy farmers under that sort of stress that enough is being done.

Mr. Bradshaw: I accept that some people are not satisfied that the Government have not already announced a mass extermination of badgers in areas such as that represented by my hon. Friend. However, I suggest to him that no Government could do that in the absence of scientific evidence to support it and serious work on cost-effectiveness, practicability and sustainability.

I absolutely understand my hon. Friend's point. I have spent a lot of time talking to farmers who have been affected by bovine TB. It is a terrible and distressing experience, although I should point out that the Exeter university study shows that the overall economic impact has not been major, even in an area such as Devon. I believe that the report says that only one farmer who has been affected by a TB breakdown has consequently left the livestock industry.

Single Payment Scheme

5. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): How many officials were employed in administering the single payment scheme *in 2004–05; and what the* administrative cost of the scheme was in that year. [2604]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Knight): In 2004–05, the Rural Payments Agency incurred single payment scheme development costs of around £11.3 million as part of a wider change programme to modernise the making of common agricultural policy payments. Staff working full time on the single payment scheme increased during the year to 242 by March 2005, in preparation for the 16 May scheme deadline. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs met its target of reducing the cost of administering common agricultural policy payments by 10 per cent. by 31 March 2005.

Dr. Cable: I thank the Minister for that informative answer, following on from our earlier discussion. Is DEFRA aware of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's initiative to reduce paperwork for small companies? Over and above all the complexities of mapping and the application forms about which we heard earlier, is he aware that hundreds of thousands of farmers received separately 10 documents—explanatory booklets—relating to the scheme, which amounted to 357 pages? The documents included gems such as an explanatory note on the calculation of allocation, which told readers to replace throughout the word "increased" with "decreased". Who is ultimately accountable for the vast waste of resources involved in the exercise?

Jim Knight: I am aware that farmers have received a large amount of paperwork in relation to the scheme, much of which has been the result of widespread consultation that was carried out because we were introducing a new scheme. It would be a shame if the House lost sight of the real benefits that we will get from the scheme when the teething problems have been sorted out. It will bring farmers closer to the market, enabling them to provide the safe, high-quality food that the market wants. It will reduce the damaging environmental impact caused by overproduction and cut bureaucracy. It will also place the EU in a position to secure a World Trade Organisation agreement on agriculture under the Doha round.

Energy Efficiency

6. **Mr. Rob Wilson** (Reading, East) (Con): Why the revised figure for domestic energy efficiency savings in the energy efficiency implementation plan excluded projected carbon savings in the white goods sector for 2000 to 2010. [2606]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): The revised figure does include projected savings from all household appliances, including white goods. These are shown in annex 3 of the plan, table A3, and the value is given as 0.1 to 0.2 million tonnes of carbon a year.

Mr. Wilson: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. Does she agree that there has been a significant backsliding on the targets for reducing carbon energy emissions and for efficiency, and that it is important that we are told today what percentage improvement in domestic energy efficiency the Government have achieved?

Margaret Beckett: No, I do not accept that there has been a backsliding. We are not on course to meet our CO_2 targets, if that is what the hon. Gentleman means, but we have made substantial improvements on the previous position. It is the case that we need to do more, and as much as we can, through energy efficiency measures. I do not carry in my head the latest figures on how much has been done on that, but he will probably know that the energy efficiency commitment is substantially strengthened and will run for a longer period—it is something like double the original level. He may also know about the energy efficiency innovation plan, which I think the Chancellor announced in his last Budget. A great deal of work is going on. We are reassessing the whole climate change programme and will make announcements later.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney) (Lab): Barely a day goes by without a major story on climate change coming forth from our television screens. Should not we capture that public concern with a mass public campaign about energy saving so that we get everyone to do their bit? I do not hear that debate going on at the moment. We have programmes, but we are not into mass communication. The rise in prosperity in this country is, I fear, being translated instead into more of an American lifestyle, in which we consume energy more profligately than we should.

Margaret Beckett: I take my hon. Friend's point entirely, including what he says about a mass campaign. If he looks at his utility bills, he will find that, under instructions from the Government, the utility companies are drawing to people's attention the potential of energy saving and that they offer energy efficiency and energy services packages.

As a result of the moneys that we secured in the 2004 spending review, we have given an additional £10 million to the Energy Saving Trust to boost its activities in giving advice and support, and it proposes to pilot sustainable energy centres. We ourselves are developing a new £12 million climate change communications initiative, which we hope will do more to make people aware not only of the nature of the problems, but of what they can do to address them.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the notice that she gave of answering questions. I wish she would persuade her colleagues in the Wales Office to be as courteous.

The target of a 30 per cent. improvement in domestic efficiency by 2010 was restated no fewer than 23 times in the Government review that monitored the implementation of the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995. With only five years to go, will the right hon. Lady explain what she can do to achieve that target, especially if she does not know where she is at the moment with regard to the figures?

Margaret Beckett: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new responsibilities on the Front Bench. I am sure that he will find it a fascinating and enjoyable experience.

I do not have the specific figures as to where we are in terms of energy efficiency, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that a great deal of work is going on to assess both what has been achieved through energy efficiency measures and what more can be done. That is a key part of our approach to the climate change programme review. I am confident that it will form part of the recommendations.

Illegal Meat Imports

7. **Mr. John Randall** (Uxbridge) (Con): What assessment she has made of the threat to biosecurity from illegal meat imports. [2607]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): It is impossible to eliminate completely the risk from illegal imports, but a number of measures that the Government have taken to improve prevention, detection and domestic biosecurity have, we believe, reduced the risk.

Mr. Randall: I thank the Minister for his reply. Have the Government looked at new imaging technologies to detect meat and plant material in personal luggage?

Mr. Bradshaw: Yes, we have been considering that, and if the research that we have been doing proves to be useful in this important work, we will certainly take a serious look at it. That is on top of a number of other measures that we have taken, including £29 million of expenditure over three years, 100 new dedicated customs officers and 10 sniffer dogs operating at our airports and ports. The National Audit Office recently published a very complimentary report on the work of customs in detecting illegal imports.

Pollution Control

8. **Chris McCafferty** (Calder Valley) (Lab): What the estimated cost is of extending the Environment Agency pollution inventory to sites regulated by local authorities under the local authority pollution control and local authority pollution prevention and control regimes. [2608]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): We have not established the cost of doing what my hon. Friend suggests because we believe that a better use of time and resources is to concentrate on action to reduce harmful emissions.

Chris McCafferty: I thank the Minister for that brief reply. Does he accept that extending the pollution inventory to the 17,000-plus sites regulated by local authorities would improve public access on the net to information about pollution from local businesses and thereby help to reduce pollution and improve public health?

Mr. Bradshaw: I agree that it might well increase the amount of information available, although information is available about the 17,000 sites that my hon. Friend mentions, which are the lesser-polluting installations. It is important that the Government, in making decisions on these things, act in a proportionate manner that does not overburden either local authorities or local businesses and, as I said in my original answer, concentrates our efforts and resources on dealing with the problem of emissions, rather than the quality and collection of data, important though that is.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): Does the Minister consider it timeous to use the register to take in sites within 200 to 600 m of high-level pylons? As he knows, the latest study, the Draper study, concluded that children living in households within 200 to 600 m of overhead cables are nearly twice as likely to have leukaemia. Is it not time that we took a serious look at air pollution and put those sites on the register so that we do not build more houses in those zones and cause childhood leukaemia as a result?

Mr. Bradshaw: I shall certainly consider my hon. Friend's suggestion. I do not know whether it would be legally possible to take in the alleged danger posed by pylon sites under these regulations, which are about pollution and the emissions of substances that we know cause harm, but I shall have a look at the matter and write to him.

Single Payment Scheme

9. **Mr. Mark Francois** (Rayleigh) (Con): What discussions she has had with HM Revenue and Customs on the tax treatment of the single farm payment. [2609]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Knight): There have been a number of discussions between DEFRA and Inland Revenue officials to clarify understanding of the rules governing the single payment scheme and related tax issues.

Mr. Francois: I thank the Minister for that reply. There has been a lot of criticism about the administration of the single farm payment during questions already today, but the Minister may know that the problem is compounded by further uncertainty about the tax status of the payment. Will he confirm whether it will be classified as farming income for tax purposes? If he is unable to give a definitive reply now, because he has to liaise with the Inland Revenue, will he at least undertake to give such an answer in writing by the end of the month?

Jim Knight: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question, because I am aware of farmers' concern about the matter. Tax issues are of course a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer rather than this Department, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that a dedicated tax bulletin on the single payment scheme will be published on 24 June, and I trust that it will answer his questions.

Local Authority Housing (Energy Efficiency)

10. **Mr. Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to encourage local authorities to improve energy efficiency in their housing stock. [2610]

The Minister for Climate Change and the Environment (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government are reviewing the guidance issued to local authorities under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995. We have set targets to ensure that all social housing is made decent by 2010, and we are encouraging councils to work in partnership with energy suppliers through the energy efficiency commitment and our funding of the Energy Saving Trust.

Mr. Hepburn: Is the Minister aware that homes waste about £5 billion-worth of energy a year and that a quarter of all harmful carbon emissions emanate from the home? Bearing it in mind that housing associations and councils run a quarter of the homes in the country, and that there is climate change and fuel poverty to consider, will the Minister use his influence to try to get them to do something about that?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend is right; we have made considerable progress on fuel poverty in the private sector. In the local authority sector, the insulation of something like 250,000 council homes has been upgraded. He is right that energy efficiency is an important key step in any strategy on reducing emissions and dealing with climate change. We are also reviewing building regulations—the new regulations will be out next year—and, in conjunction with the ODPM, looking at the findings of the sustainable buildings taskforce, which has particular potential to reduce emissions from housing.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): The House will be aware of proposals from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for low-cost, affordable housing, which I am sure we all welcome. Will the Minister be ensuring that the low-cost housing provided under that scheme will be built to the highest energy-efficiency standards, so that the long-term costs take account of the needs that my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) outlined in his question?

Mr. Morley: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are talking to organisations such as the

Building Research Establishment about better standards of building. I had the opportunity of seeing some of the possible designs at the recent conference organised in Manchester by the ODPM. To have the very highest energy- efficiency standards does not add a great deal to the cost of new buildings, and even if there are additional costs, they are of course recovered by lower fuel bills over time.

Farming and Food Industry

11. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage the farming and food industry to expand domestic demand for its products. [2611]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Knight): Our strategy is focused on helping industry adapt and build on its capacity to produce and deliver efficiently and sustainably what the market wants. By reconnecting farmers with the market, common agricultural policy reform, which we have discussed so much this morning, is key to ensuring that the farming industry can better respond to consumer demands and increase its competitiveness. In addition, our public sector food procurement initiative and support for the red tractor logo are examples of the Government's support for UK producers.

Mr. Boswell: I welcome the Minister to his new post and thank him for that reply. Does he accept that the key way forward for British agriculture is through increasing value added? That is important to British consumers every bit as much as it is to British farmers, and incidentally reduces the amount of unnecessary and wasteful movement of food between continents. In that spirit, and building on the work of Donald Curry and others, will he undertake on behalf of the Government to do every bit as much to support British agriculture in providing value added to British consumers as do European counterpart Ministers in support of their own industries?

Jim Knight: I certainly welcome that response. As ever, the hon. Gentleman takes an intelligent approach to these matters. The food and farming taskforce is addressing those issues, and I certainly agree with what he said.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I also welcome the Minister to his new post; I am sure that he will have a very interesting time in DEFRA. One key thing that his Ministry could do to help British agriculture—I declare my interest as set out in the Register of Members' Interests—is encourage all public procurement bodies to purchase British food. Will his Ministry take an initiative in that respect and particularly address the Department of Education and Skills and the Ministry of Defence, which are large food procurement agencies?

Jim Knight: The public sector food procurement initiative that I mentioned, which was launched on 26 August 2003, is designed to do exactly that, within the rules that we all understand. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have read the Labour party's rural manifesto, which says clearly that, as part of the Government's commitment to schools, we will look through the school food trust to local farmers and suppliers for their produce wherever possible.

Renewable Transport Fuels

12. **Mr. Jeremy Hunt** (South-West Surrey) (Con): Whether it is her Department's policy to meet the European Union's 2 per cent. target for renewable transport fuels by 2005. [2612]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett): The Government have set the UK's target at 0.3 per cent. use of biofuels by 2005. That amounts to about 12 million litres a month, which is a significant increase over current sales. It reflects the situation as the Government expect it to be with the current support. The key issue is not the 2005 target but the long-term development of the industry.

Mr. Hunt: Will the Secretary of State explain why, if she is so committed to encouraging the use of environmentally friendly biofuels, there seems to be a Sir Humphrey-like delay in instituting a renewable transport fuel order that would make that happen? It appears to have become bogged down in what is described as a feasibility study.

Margaret Beckett: I hardly think that it is consistent with evidence-based or sensible policy making to impose such an obligation without carrying out a feasibility study and consulting stakeholders. The hon. Gentleman is right because that is exactly what the Government are doing. We take seriously the potential of the renewable transport obligation, but I do not think that the House would expect the Government to take such a profound step without full consideration of all the options. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are moving as speedily as we can, and we will report to the House as soon as we can.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Caton.

Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell) (Lab): It is Mr. Challen, Mr. Speaker. It has been a while since I last rose.

The Americans—we have to listen to them a great deal on climate change—claim that they have a 12 per cent. consumption rate of bioethanol. Will my right hon. Friend examine how they have achieved that—I know that there are specific reasons for it—to ascertain whether in our future review we can learn some lessons from them?

Margaret Beckett: I assure my hon. Friend that we are willing to learn lessons from any source that is useful and practical, and I take his point. As I think I said earlier to the hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mr. Hunt), we are starting from an extremely low starting point. The target that we have set for 2005 is, from memory, about five or six times the present level of consumption. Some member states in the EU have not

set any target at all for 2005. I assure my hon. Friend that we wish to make speedy progress on this directive and that we are willing to learn from anywhere.

Horse Passports

13. Mr. **Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West) (Con): How many horses have been issued with passports. [2613]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jim Knight): Based on the data that we have received from English Passport issuing organisations, 580,183 passports have been issued, and a further 24,915 applications are currently being processed. Among those issued include two by the Arab Horse Society for my family's two horses, Merlin and Shadow.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the Minister for that response and for those large numbers. He will appreciate that under his regulations horses have a greater need of passports than we do—they require them even to breed. Given that, how many passports does the hon. Gentleman imagine have yet to be applied for and issued? What is the current level of compliance?

Mr. Knight: We are pleased with the level of compliance. We are pleased also with the welcome that we have had for the horse passport scheme from horse welfare societies such as the International League for the Protection of Horses. Passports are a good thing. They reduce the risks for the continued availability of many commonly used veterinary medicines; they discourage indiscriminate breeding of horses and ponies; and they also discourage theft, because the sale and certain use of horses are now dependent on the passport accompanying the horse.

Fishing Industry

14. **Mr. Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If she will make a statement on prospects for the fishing industry. [2614]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): The prospects for the fishing industry are good so long as fishing effort is set according to the health of fish stocks. I was pleased that following assiduous lobbying by the hon. Gentleman I was able to persuade the European Fisheries Council to remove the haddock permit scheme, which I know has been warmly welcomed by the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Mr. Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that answer. I welcome his return to the fishing brief. As we view the prospects of taking the presidency of the Fisheries Council, his presence offers us a welcome element of continuity. Will he use his time in the chair of the Fisheries Council to address the wide discrepancy that is now reported among member states in the imposition of penalties for breach of fishing regulations? He will be aware that last week the Commission published a report indicating that penalties range from £189 in Finland to £52,000 in this country, and that there is an EU average of £3,130. If we are to be part of a common policy, surely our fishermen deserve fairer treatment than that.

Mr. Bradshaw: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. I am grateful for his kind remarks about the importance of the forthcoming presidency and the chairmanship of European Council meetings that I will share with my right hon. and hon. Friends across the Government. He is quite right about the importance of a level playing field. The British Government take that extremely seriously, as does the Commission. The new Commissioner, Joe Borg, has introduced an action plan to ensure that the penalties to which the hon. Gentleman referred are much more equal in the common fisheries policy. If we do not have a level playing field on enforcement, it is not a genuinely common fisheries policy at all.

Energy-efficient Housing

15. **Mr. Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth, East) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Department of Health on measures to promote access to energy-efficient housing as a national public health priority. [2616]

The Minister for Climate Change and the Environment (Mr. Elliot Morley): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had no direct discussion with the Department of Health on this matter. However, we fully recognise the health benefits that can come from improving the energy standards of housing, and that is a key factor in the development of our programmes to tackle fuel poverty and improve the energy efficiency of housing.

Mr. Ellwood: That answer is a little disappointing. Surely, this should be a priority. The Government should state exactly what their intentions are and, indeed, lay out a time scale for such programmes.

Mr. Morley: We are reviewing the issue of energy-efficient housing, as I spelt out in my previous answer. Energy efficiency reduces emissions and costs, but there are also health benefits, which we take seriously and which we address through a cross-government approach.

Business of the House

11.31 am

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 JUNE—Consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 14 JUNE—Second Reading of the National Lottery Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 JUNE—A debate on European affairs on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

THURSDAY 16 JUNE—Second Reading of the Transport (Wales) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the direction given by the Secretary of State under section 51B (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

FRIDAY 17 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week after will be as follows:

MONDAY 20 JUNE—Second Reading of the Violent Crime Reduction Bill.

TUESDAY 21 JUNE—Second Reading of the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill.

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE—Opposition Day [2nd Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 23 JUNE—Second Reading of the Regulation of Financial Services (Land Transactions) Bill.

FRIDAY 24 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for the remainder of June will be as follows:

THURSDAY 16 JUNE—A debate on the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

THURSDAY 23 JUNE—A debate on recent developments in volunteering.

THURSDAY 30 JUNE—A debate on turning around problem estates.

Chris Grayling: Will the Leader of the House explain why there has not been a statement in the House about the Government's plan to introduce road pricing? You will know, Mr. Speaker, that details of the proposals were leaked to the media last weekend and that the Secretary of State for Transport is making a speech about his plans to the Social Market Foundation tonight, yet we have not heard anything in the House. Does the Leader of the House not believe that there should have been a statement this week, and what does he plan to do to rectify the situation? Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, you will recall giving clear guidance at the beginning of this Parliament that major policy announcements should be made to the House, not to the media and outside groups. In this case, that guidance seems to have been completely ignored. Does the Leader of the House defend that, or does he agree with me that it is time for the House to say that enough is enough. When a Minister behaves in the cavalier way the Secretary of State for Transport has behaved this week, it is time for the House to take action to reprimand them—possibly to suspend them.

Will the right hon. Gentleman set aside Government time for a debate in the House on Britain's bid for the 2012 Olympics? Does he agree that in the remaining few weeks before the decision it is important for the House and hon. Members to make their support for the bid quite clear? Will he provide an opportunity for us to do so and express our support for the efforts of Lord Coe, his team and the people of London? Will the right hon. Gentleman provide time as soon as possible for a debate on the implementation of the Licensing Act 2003? He will be aware that the deadlines for registration are fast approaching and that many small clubs, sporting organisations and others are not fully aware of the requirements that they need to fulfil under the Act. Will he make sure that we have the opportunity to raise those issues in the House and do what we can to make those involved aware of the situation?

Finally, will the Leader of the House organise as a matter of urgency a statement on the situation in Zimbabwe? He will have seen—I am sure with the shock and discomfort that I suspect all Members of this House felt—developments in the past few weeks involving clearances and people being rendered homeless. It would be appropriate for the House to have an opportunity to address those issues quickly, and I hope that he will share that view and do something about it.

Mr. Hoon: I am slightly puzzled by the hon. Gentleman's first observation, since he obviously has not studied the Labour party manifesto with the care that I would expect. It clearly set out our intention to launch a debate about road pricing. He will also be aware that the convention on ministerial statements is that Ministers are rightly required to make statements when there is a change in Government policy. This is not a change in Government policy, but an extensive consultation exercise about the extent to which members of the public would support the initiative of road pricing. We are not necessarily saying as yet that it is the right way forward; we are saying that there should be a discussion. Indeed, if he checks with his Front-Bench colleague who speaks for the Opposition on transport, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), he will find that his colleagues welcomed the initiative. If his hon. Friend had been so concerned about the need for a Minister to make a statement, he could have tabled a private notice question, but none was forthcoming. This is a debate. It is not a change in Government policy, and a statement is therefore not required.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's observations about the Opposition's support for this country's bid to host the Olympic games, and I am sure that his raising the matter today has considerably assisted the campaign.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his observations about the Licensing Act 2003. I am also grateful for the opportunity to remind those who might be affected that it is necessary to make applications by 6 August. The hon. Gentleman has provided me with a useful opportunity to emphasise the importance of that issue, although we are confident that everyone will have the opportunity to make an application in due time.

[Mr. Hoon]

I join the hon. Gentleman in condemning the situation in Zimbabwe. We know that the opposition there have today organised a stay-away, and we would condemn absolutely any use of force against people who are peacefully demonstrating. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to reassert the Government's clear view on the matter.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Colin Challen.

Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell) (Lab): It is a pleasure to rise so often today, Mr. Speaker.

May I draw to my right hon. Friend's attention the recent report of the Council for Science and Technology on electricity supply and strategy for the UK, which shows that UK spend on research and development has dropped to 5 per cent. of the level 30 years ago? I think that that probably points to a crisis in research and development. Similar figures apply to new graduates in electrical engineering, so it is clear that there is a problem. Can we have an early debate on the issue, which we know is of profound importance?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important subject. We are all well aware in the Government of the importance of spend on research and development, and I have previously said to the House that we perhaps do not always devote as much time as we should to questions of science and technology.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving the business up to 24 June. Will he look ahead one further week, however, and consider giving Government time for a full day's debate during the week starting 27 June on Government policy on Africa? It would be entirely appropriate prior to the G8 Gleneagles summit for this House to have the opportunity to reflect the views of so many of our constituents.

Can the Leader of the House find time for a statement by the Secretary of State for Health on the tragic events at Stoke Mandeville hospital and the outbreak of clostridium difficile? We have had a lot of discussion about MRSA, but none as yet, as far as I am aware, about this very dangerous bug, and it would be appropriate for the House to have an opportunity for such a discussion.

To echo the point made by the shadow Leader of the House, now that the Leader of the House has a gap in his legislative programme because of the lapsing of the European Union Bill, is it not appropriate to introduce a small Bill, entitled the Licensing Act 2003 (Amendments) Bill, in order to reduce the threat that is being posed to so many of our village halls and sports clubs, which under the present arrangements will find it impossible to continue to operate and provide a social function in villages?

Lastly, perhaps we should hold a debate called, "Errata and omissions in the list of ministerial responsibilities". As I indicated to the Leader of the House last week, the Deputy Prime Minister has retained his former role promoting the interests of the north across Government. I have searched the list of ministerial responsibilities, but I cannot find any reference to the responsibility for promoting the interests of the south-west across Government. A Cabinet Minister must be responsible for that matter; who is it?

Mr. Hoon: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's raising the G8. We are examining how we can ensure that the House has the opportunity to debate and discuss the important issues, including Africa, before the summit.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the outbreak at Stoke Mandeville hospital, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is looking into the situation as a matter of urgency.

I note the hon. Gentleman's kind concern for my welfare in relation to an alleged gap in the legislative programme, but I draw his attention to the huge volume of Bills that we set out at the start of the Session. I assure him that a gap does not exist, and if it did exist, it has been filled. However, I share his concern about the potential impact on village halls and sports clubs of the Licensing Act 2003. We have acknowledged the issue and will obviously ensure that its impact is minimised.

Finally, when I find out who is responsible for the south-west, I will let the hon. Gentleman know.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I declare an interest as the patron of the Society of Registration Officers. In the last Session of Parliament, the Regulatory Reform Committee rejected the largest ever regulatory reform order, which formed the first stage of a massive reform of the civil registration service. The Committee felt that the matter was too important to be dealt with through delegated legislation and that hon. Members should have the chance to debate the proposals on the Floor of the House. Furthermore, I note that the reform of the coroner service has leapfrogged the reform of the civil registration service. Will my right hon. Friend arrange a debate, or at the very least a statement, on how the Government will implement those long-awaited reforms?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has made his observations with his customary clarity, and I will ensure that the appropriate Department responds accordingly.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Royal Shrewsbury hospital has £19 million of debts, which are causing a great deal of concern. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate on the matter?

Mr. Hoon: All hon. Members can apply in the usual way for Adjournment debates. There is usually ample opportunity for such debates to take place, and the subject sounds like the perfect vehicle for one.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): Without wishing be misunderstood, I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has not announced the Second Reading of the Identity Cards Bill. Can we take it that the Government are giving the matter further consideration in view of the considerable concern that has been

expressed both inside and outside this House—although no doubt if there were a Conservative Government, the same measure would be introduced. [HON. MEMBERS: "Never."] Well, the Leader of the Opposition is very keen on identity cards. Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind hon. Members' concerns? On a free vote—if the Bill comes before the House, it will obviously not be a free vote—it would certainly be defeated.

Mr. Hoon: I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is particularly keen to hold extensive consultations and discussions with hon. Members from both sides of the House before the Bill is read a Second time, but it will be read a Second time.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Could we have an early debate entitled "Government Promises"? The right hon. Gentleman will recall that on Monday the European Union Bill was withdrawn. That is in breach of a clear undertaking by the Prime Minister. On 13 May, he gave a Government promise that we would have a referendum whether or not other countries voted no. He said that on at least two previous occasions in the House of Commons—on 20 April 2004, at column 164 of *Hansard*, and on 21 June 2004, when he said:

"Regardless of how other members vote, we will have a referendum on the subject."—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2004; Vol. 422, c. 1090.]

According to the Europe Minister, he also said it on 18 April 2005. This disregard for pledged words is bringing politics into disrepute. Can we have a debate so that we can identify which of the Prime Minister's assurances can be relied upon and which are to be treated as promises?

Mr. Hoon: I cannot promise the right hon. and learned Gentleman an early debate, but I can assure him that we have had a national debate on Government promises—it was called the general election. We set out the Government's promises in our manifesto. I am sorry that more Opposition Members have chosen not to read it, because that is the manifesto on which this country will be governed during this parliamentary Session. Those promises were obviously supported by a much larger number of members of the electorate than were, unfortunately, the promises set out by the Opposition.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): In light of today's news regarding the Victoria Climbié case, whereby the social worker who had been banned from working with children is now able to do so, could we have an early debate on child protection issues? Does the Leader of the House agree that one mark of a civilised society is that those who have to be charged with looking after and protecting our children have the necessary resources, supervision, training and salaries to ensure that the important work that they do is properly rewarded?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important but sensitive issue. I hope that he and the House will forgive me if I do not comment on a particular case and a particular legal process that has been concluded, but he is right to call for a proper discussion about the way in which these important and sensitive matters are resolved.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): May we have an urgent statement from the Health Secretary on the catastrophic state of affairs regarding the New Forest primary care trust? With a multi-million pound deficit, it is finding excuses to close down in-patient beds in cottage hospitals. It is threatening to close all those beds. It promised a consultation exercise. It has not held it, yet it has reduced the options from five to two—one is that it will close most of the beds, and the other that it will close all the beds. This is a total breach of faith with the people of the New Forest. It is a scandal, and we urgently need an investigation.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is not known for his modest use of language, and I am not personally familiar with the circumstances in the particular trust that he describes, but I am looking forward to reading his speech in the Adjournment debate that he may apply for, when I will learn a great deal more about the issue.

Ms Celia Barlow (Hove) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the excellent work that is carried out in my local NHS trust by the Lawson clinic in the area of post-exposure prophylaxis, known as PEP? Is he aware that although PEP is available to some of my constituents in Hove and Portslade, it is unfortunately not available universally? PEP is a treatment given to people who have been exposed to HIV. It has to be undertaken within 72 hours of potential exposure and is up to 80 per cent. effective in preventing the HIV virus from taking hold. May I urge my right hon. Friend to consider a debate on making PEP available in sexual health clinics and accident and emergency departments throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hoon: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for making that information available to me and to the House, as I am sure that many other right hon. and hon. Members are not familiar with that detail. Again, I am sure that it would be an appropriate subject for an Adjournment debate here or in Westminster Hall.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware that following the 2001 general election, which took place on 7 June that year, the Government's proposals for the membership of Select Committees first appeared on the Order Paper precisely five weeks later, on 12 July? Is he further aware that following this year's general election on 5 May, the same five-week period is up as of today? Is it not incumbent upon him, given the importance of Select Committees in scrutinising the performance of this Government, to ensure that they are set up forthwith?

Mr. Hoon: It is important that the Committees are set up at an early stage. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for drawing the matter to my attention again. It is the second time this week that it has been raised with me and I have certainly got the message. However, it is important that the processes of the

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political parties, which are responsible for making nominations, are allowed to continue on a proper and appropriate course.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): May I add my voice from the Labour Benches to a request for a full debate in the Chamber on Africa before the G8 summit, and especially for a discussion on the Commission for Africa report? It is a major and important work, yet we have not had an opportunity in the House for a full discussion of it.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue and I assure her that the Government are considering as a matter of some urgency finding an appropriate time for such a debate.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): I welcome the fact that we will have a short debate next Thursday on a motion under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 about taking sanctions against Sinn Fein. That is right and proper, but may I press the Leader of the House for a more wide-ranging debate, in Government time and in the Chamber, on Northern Ireland generally? We have not held such a debate for many years. Given the changed political circumstances after the election, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is an appropriate time to take stock of the situation and to hold an early debate?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about an important part of the United Kingdom. I shall draw his observations to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is aware of the importance of Airbus 350 not only to the north-west of England and north Wales, where the wings are built, but to the whole country. It is important for Airbus itself and new carbon fibre technology. Will he arrange for an early statement by relevant Department of Trade and Industry or Treasury Ministers on repayable launch investment in that important project?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has been assiduous in his support for a vital aspect of British industry, working in close collaboration with our European partners. The Prime Minister has shown strong support for the initiative and, I believe, has recently met my hon. Friend and other hon. Members whose constituencies are affected by Airbus Industries. My hon. Friend is also right to note that the benefit of Airbus Industries spreads throughout the United Kingdom. I assure him that, once appropriate discussions have been concluded, the House will be informed of the result of the requests.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): The shadow Leader of the House asked whether we could have a ministerial statement on Zimbabwe. It was not clear from the Leader of the House's comments whether the answer was yes or no.

May we have an early debate on the Puttnam Commission's report, which the Hansard Society published earlier this week? It made several recommendations, which would enable the House to assert its independence of the Executive. The right hon. Gentleman has joined in the debate in the columns of *The Guardian*; may we all join in it by having a debate in the House?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that there will opportunities for hon. Members to raise concerns about Zimbabwe, not least at the forthcoming Foreign Office questions.

I shall meet Lord Puttnam next week, when we will continue the debate. I am sure that, in time, it will spill over on to the Floor of the House.

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey) (Lab): There has been a great deal of discussion in recent days about congestion charging, which can only ever be part of a package of essential measures, not least the improvement of public transport. To that end, will my right hon. Friend prevail on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport to include in any debate or statement to the House the possible extension of the use of quality bus contracts, so that we can move to a position whereby services are tailored to meet the needs of passengers and communities, not simply the demands of shareholders?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, which he will be able to raise directly with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, not least when he has finished speaking today.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May we have an early statement from the Home Secretary on the possible use of section 44 of the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2000 for the policing of protests that relate to the various G8 events in different parts of the United Kingdom? Does the Leader of the House accept that it is wrong for police forces to use powers that were given to them by this House for the purpose of combating terrorism to frustrate and harass people seeking to express their views on a matter of such importance? After the summit, may we have a statement on the powers that the different police forces used and the basis on which they were employed so that we know how the powers that we give police forces are used?

Mr. Hoon: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman's observations are wholly consistent with the current devolution arrangements. Aside from that, I recognise that, in the event of large-scale demonstrations in different parts of the United Kingdom, it will be necessary for the matter to be considered and perhaps for questions to be asked in the House about it.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the European Union's expectation that member states' response to the implementation of the waste electrical and electronic equipment directive should be in place by the summer? Is he also aware—I suspect he may not be—that the discussions on implementation by the clearing-house model, which was to deal with the matter, have been inconclusive? Will he find time for a debate on the directive and its implementation and perhaps also on that of the hazardous waste directive?

Mr. Hoon: I am discovering that one of the joys of this job is the understanding that I am assumed to have of a

wide range of different European and national Government initiatives. I recognise the underlying importance of the directive to which my hon. Friend referred. A company in my constituency has raised the matter, so I am aware of the concerns that retailers and manufacturers have. However, the directive is to fulfil an important function and therefore needs to be implemented effectively. I will certainly draw my hon. Friend's observations to the attention of the appropriate Minister.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): May we have a debate on public transport at the earliest opportunity? Sadly, it is not a problem of congestion—of buses in rural areas—that I suffer from, and a debate would give me an opportunity to raise the problems that local authorities experience with rural bus services, such as the Bowland transit project. It was funded from 2000 with a great fanfare but that local funding has disappeared, the local bus services are being cut and rural people are left high and dry.

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for making a slight political observation about the fact that there was little in the way of financial support for rural bus services before 1997. I do not recall his raising that regularly with the Conservative Government of the time. We have put more money than that Conservative Government into supporting rural bus services and we will continue to do that.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): When can we have a debate on Burma? My right hon. Friend knows that more than 200 Members of Parliament there have been imprisoned for their political beliefs in the past 14 years and that 50 remain in prison for that reason. There is also the continuing detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, who celebrates her 60th birthday in house detention next weekend. When can we have an early debate so that we can discuss what the UK Government can do about that appalling situation?

Mr. Hoon: It is important that hon. Members continue to raise the appalling situation in Burma. It was done recently in business questions and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it again. I know that Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office continue to monitor the position with great concern.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Given the increasing threat of aircraft noise from Heathrow, the approaching consultation on that and the pressure on the roads through the overdevelopment of high density housing in my area, I was alarmed to read in a newspaper the announcement of what appeared to be the new Government policy on transport. Given that I am a new Member, will the Leader of the House confirm that announcements should be made to the House first? Will he also announce an early debate on the effects of overdevelopment, which is ruining our beautiful areas and causing congestion on our roads?

Mr. Hoon: That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has initiated a public debate on road pricing and the implications of congestion. That debate will need to take place over very many years, and it will clearly include other forms of transport—not least, as the hon. Gentleman has rightly observed, the expansion of air flights, which has been remarkable in recent years in this country. It is important to continue to involve the public in the debate on these implications—as the British Airports Authority has done—as they are the people who are responsible for generating more flights around the country, as well as for using their cars more frequently. It is therefore important that we all engage in that public debate.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on our manifesto pledge to introduce free bus travel? We ought to have a debate to find out what "local" means, so that we can all be aware of the good deal that we can give to the pensioners of this country. Can we also extend that debate to cover local rail travel, because that also represents a real alternative that pensioners would value?

Mr. Hoon: I know from previous observations made by my hon. Friend that he is interested in all forms of transport. This is the first time that he has raised with me the question of bus services; he is usually interested in rather larger forms of transport. Nevertheless, I can assure him that the Government and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport are absolutely committed to supporting public transport. We are spending some £230 million a week on improving public transport, and that commitment will continue.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am glad that the Leader of the House has said that there will be an opportunity to debate the G8, prior to the summit taking place in beautiful Perthshire in Scotland. It is right and proper that the House should discuss these important issues. However, will he guarantee that there will be an opportunity to discuss some of the issues relating to the staging of the event, such as compensation for local residents who might have to pay for damage caused or business lost? There is also the issue of policing. Who will meet the £100 million cost of policing the event?

Mr. Hoon: I told the House earlier that the Government are looking at ways to have a debate on the G8, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, as a skilled parliamentarian, will find ways of raising his questions during such an opportunity.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): May I join the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) in asking the Leader of the House to find time for a debate on the way in which Parliament is seen outside this building, in the light of the Hansard Society report, "Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye"? In particular, we should like to debate its proposals for a separate chief executive, a House of Commons Commission elected by Members in a secret ballot, and a communications department that would bring together all the people in the House who work with the public but who are currently scattered across four separate departments.

Mr. Hoon: I know that my hon. Friend contributed to that report, which I have read and found extremely

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interesting. It contains many valuable comments about the way in which Parliament functions, and the noble Lord Puttnam and the other members of the commission are to be congratulated on stimulating what I judge to be an extremely important debate. There are ways in which the House has, in the past, considered questions of modernisation, and I hope that it will consider taking a similar approach in the future so that those matters can be discussed by Members.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate to take note of the rising anger and frustration of the voluntary sector in Great Britain? It is concerned about the increasing burdens being placed on it by the Government, the latest example of which is the near 400 per cent. increase in inspection charges being demanded of charitable, voluntarily run bodies such as the 39 multiple sclerosis therapy centres in England and Wales. In Bedfordshire, that will cost £40,000 over the next decade. Why do the Government think that that money is better spent on inspection rather than on patient care and the treatment of those suffering from multiple sclerosis?

Mr. Hoon: May I first take the opportunity to congratulate all those who are volunteers? Many aspects of our society simply could not function but for the time, effort and, often, financial sacrifice made by those people. I also pay tribute to the volunteers in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I am sure that the work they do allows many people to benefit in ways that would not otherwise be possible. However, he will understand, as a former Minister, the balance that has to be struck between necessary regulation—I emphasise the word "necessary"—and all aspects of our society. This is an area in which it is necessary for there to be inspection, and I trust that that inspection is carried out effectively, but also in as light a way as is consistent with the important work that is being done.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): May we have an early debate on the state of our public health laws? We have a small but significant case in Leicester of tuberculosis, which has been caused by a convicted criminal who refuses to take the necessary medication to cure him of the infection. So far, 12 people have been infected by him. The health authority in Leicestershire has said that it cannot do anything because it cannot compel an individual to take medication. Can we have an early debate on this important issue?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important and difficult question, not least given the emergence of diseases that had, for many people, thankfully been eradicated. If my hon. Friend would like to make any suggestions as to how the law might need to be amended, I look forward to hearing them and I can assure him that the Government would take them extremely seriously.

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): The Leader of the House might be aware of the proposals by npower renewables to construct one of the world's largest wind farms off the coast of Clwyd, West, and of the further proposals for the construction of a wind farm on the Rhyl flats. Both those proposals are meeting with considerable local objection. Unfortunately, however, the planning and licensing regime in this country is such that the objections of individuals are virtually irrelevant to the application process. Given that there are likely to be many more such applications, will the Leader of the House make time available for an urgent debate on this important issue?

Mr. Hoon: The House has already had, and will continue to have, debates on the importance of alternative energy supplies. I recognise the huge controversy that is generated in relation to wind farms. We are all familiar with such circumstances—people are in favour in principle of alternative energy and other aspects of improving the environment, until they appear close to their own back door. These are issues that should properly be addressed through the planning procedures, but I am concerned to learn that individual representations are not being taken seriously. They form an important part of our planning process and should be properly regarded.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. Friend consider holding a debate on the future of motor racing, especially in relation to the issue of extra-territoriality, which could affect the future of the industry, given the provisions of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002?

Mr. Hoon: I am well aware of the importance of motor racing to the economy of the United Kingdom, of how many jobs are created here, and of the great success of the industry around the world. I can assure my hon. Friend that any legislation that has been passed was not intended to have extra-territorial implications, and was not intended to go beyond the terms of, in this case, a directive. That directive needs to be interpreted consistently with its terms; it should not be gold-plated or interpreted in any more extravagant a way.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): May I put it gently to the Leader of the House that his responses have not done justice to the situation in Zimbabwe, and that the disgraceful scenes witnessed in Harare require action from this Government? Merely condemning them from the Dispatch Box and suggesting that Members might be lucky in the ballot for Foreign Office questions is not enough. We need the Foreign Secretary to come to the House and make a statement, and we need an urgent debate, if not just on Zimbabwe then, as other Members have requested, on the whole of Africa.

Mr. Hoon: The right hon. Gentleman has been assiduous in rightly raising this issue over many years, on which he is to be congratulated. He knows full well, however, that the Government have taken a series of strong measures against the leadership of Zimbabwe and have persuaded other European Union members to impose some of the toughest sanctions anywhere in the world on the leadership of that country. How those sanctions can be made most effective is always an issue,

but they are targeted rightly at those who lead Zimbabwe and do not, therefore, further damage the position of the people of that country.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): A debate on MG Rover will be held in Westminster Hall next week in Back-Bench time, and I hope to get the opportunity to speak in it. However, may I press the Leader of the House on the need for a debate in Government time on what has happened at MG Rover? Yesterday, the chairman of the taskforce came to brief MPs about the fact that only 500 out of the 6,000 people who have been made redundant have been employed, despite all the efforts and money put in by the Government. Other issues such as pensions, which I have raised previously, and the activities of directors still leave cause for serious concern. Can the right hon. Gentleman therefore assure us that there will be a debate in Government time at some future stage so that we can learn more of the lessons of the MG Rover debacle?

Mr. Hoon: As I am sure the hon. Lady is aware, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 31 May that a full investigation and inquiry into MG Rover would take place. I am sure that she agrees with me on the need to ensure that that inquiry is thorough and rigorous and that we do not pre-empt its outcome before having a necessary debate in the House about that matter.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the important subject of energy policy? There is intense speculation about the future of nuclear energy, and continuing concern about the future of the photovoltaics demonstration programme. Businesses need to know in advance what the framework will be for the years ahead, and the House needs an opportunity to discuss those matters.

Mr. Hoon: If any other Member raises the question of an energy debate during business questions, I will be tempted to say that we are having one. Nevertheless, I regard these questions as being of fundamental importance, as do the Government. We have already had discussions, in the short time since Parliament reassembled, about the effect of climate change, and I am sure that those issues will recur throughout the Parliament and be part of the important debate that G8 countries have at their summit.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I am sure that the Leader of the House is aware that more than half our servicemen killed in Iraq have yet to have coroners' inquiries completed over the circumstances of their deaths. He and I can only imagine how that adds to the already considerable burden of grief among their families. May we have an early debate to find out why those circumstances have occurred and to ensure that such very sad events do not occur again?

Mr. Hoon: I am particularly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this very difficult issue. I have met many of those family members and know how important it is to them that these questions are resolved, and resolved in a way that gives them satisfaction. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs is made aware of the question and that appropriate action is taken. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, however, such issues are part of judicial independence, and sensitive legal matters must be resolved.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Next Wednesday, we will have yet another debate on European affairs—the traditional full-day debate immediately prior to a summit or Council meeting. Will my right hon. Friend consider whether we have too many—and too lengthy—debates on European affairs, not least because Members might be repeating speeches that they have made in several debates, and therefore feel that it is unnecessary to repeat them all over again next week? On a serious point, will he consider changing the tradition for the future, as we now have many more summits and Council meetings than in the past. Would it make more sense to have a statement, or half-day debate, prior to a Council or summit meeting rather than a full-day debate, so that we can allow time for some of the other debates that Members have requested today?

Mr. Hoon: I sat through a good part of yesterday's debate on the European issue, and I must say that at least my hon. Friend's approach is consistent: he maintains the same approach on European affairs from one debate to the next. If Opposition Members, particularly Conservative ones, will forgive me for saying so, the wide variety of views expressed from the Conservative Benches yesterday was interesting—a variety that seemed to include disavowing their past and the noble Baroness Thatcher's contribution to European debate in the recent past. Perhaps that makes the Conservative party today a revisionist party.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Will the Leader of the House indicate when the Government intend to publish their response to the Joint Committee's report on the draft Mental Health Bill, which concluded in the previous Parliament? Will he provide Government time in which we can debate both the Government's response and the report, so that we can begin to allay the concerns of mental health service users, charities and health professionals about the current draft Bill?

Mr. Hoon: I understand the concern. This issue, which was raised at the previous business question, is important for the Government, and we intend to move ahead with the Bill.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): May I add my voice to those who have called for an early debate on energy policy, but in a slightly different context? My right hon. Friend will know that in addition to early decisions that need to be taken about the unfinished business of the 2003 White Paper on energy—such as the future of renewables and nuclear—under the Energy Act 2004 the Government are required to produce a strategy on microgeneration by the end of this year. Given that that is the least well known and understood aspect of new energy technologies, can we have a debate in the near future specifically on the future of microgeneration?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has set out in some detail a five-year programme for energy policy. Although I am not familiar with the aspect of the policy that he raises, I am confident that the Government will make a substantial investment in alternative sources of energy supply and that that will be part of the wider debate on energy that I set out to the House.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware that there is a desperate shortage of police officers in the Kettering constituency and for the county of Northamptonshire as a whole? Indeed, the chief constable of Northamptonshire has placed on the record that he needs at least 200 more police officers to police the county to the standards required. Will the right hon. Gentleman arrange for the Home Secretary to make an early statement in the House about when the policing needs of the people of the Kettering constituency and the county of Northamptonshire will at last be met?

Mr. Hoon: There are, of course, record numbers of police officers across the country. I do not know the precise figures for Northamptonshire, but I anticipate that, in common with other parts of the east midlands, with which I am more familiar, there will be more police officers in Northamptonshire today than there have ever been, and certainly than before 1997. I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary takes these questions extremely seriously. We will be considering ways in which to improve not only the number of police officers, but the way in which they work.

Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Further to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Martin Linton), my right hon. Friend will know of the Hansard Society report's recommendation that Select Committees should get out and about and take formal evidence around the country. He may also know that the Education and Skills Committee, of which I was a member during the last Parliament, spent a whole week in Birmingham taking formal evidence, spent rather less time taking formal evidence in a prison, and fleetingly took formal evidence in Paris. All those experiences were highly valuable. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the House authorities promote opportunities for Select Committees to get out of Westminster to take formal evidence? It is a great chance for Westminster to connect with different regions.

Mr. Hoon: As I have said, the Hansard Society report contains a number of interesting suggestions for the better running of Parliament. I assure my hon. Friend that we will consider them very carefully. I recognise the importance of Select Committees getting away from Westminster, although I suspect that the idea will be for them to visit wonderful places like Ashfield rather than, say, Australia.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Will the Leader of the House bring the Deputy Prime Minister here to confirm what he told the House yesterday about fire control centres being moved to regions rather than remaining at county level? As a former fireman and a member of the Fire Brigades Union, I am desperately concerned for my constituents' safety, as well as the safety of constituents elsewhere in the country. The fact that local fire control centres know the topography and understand the ground keeps our country safe. Moving the centres to regions will put lives at risk.

Mr. Hoon: I am familiar with the current debate about fire control centres. A similar debate is going on in my own county. It is important for the organisation of control centres to take full advantage of the latest technology and the best way of delivering service effectively, but I accept that that should be done without compromising the safety of the public in any way.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend arrange a debate on the Employment Tribunals Service and the problems of enforcing its decisions? That would enable me to raise the case of my constituent Thomas Wilson, who was owed £1,500 when he ended his employment with Nigel Thompson. That is an awful lot for a young worker. He went to a tribunal in April 2003 and won his case, but did not receive the money. As there is no enforcement procedure involving the ETS, he went to the county court in October 2003 and won his case. He returned to the county court in May 2004 and obtained an enforcement order for the employer to come to the court. Because the case is now a matter for civil procedure and the county court bailiffs can only enforce the order personally, and because the employer will not open the electronic gates in front of his house to allow the order to be served, this young man is still owed £1,500 three years after leaving his employment and two years after the tribunal found in his favour. Is it not about time that we changed the procedures to stop such exploitation?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend may not need a debate, having set out his case so clearly. Nevertheless, I will say—without commenting on a particular case—that if there are structural difficulties in the way in which the Employment Tribunals Service operates, they must be addressed. I accept that if parties to proceedings are not willing to accept the results, that is a structural problem that needs to be examined.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): May we please have a statement or a debate in Government time, on the incidence of childhood cancers? Given that no fewer than 350 children a year are diagnosed with brain tumours, that only 70 per cent. of those children survive for five years after the diagnosis and that brain tumours have now overtaken leukaemia as the biggest single killer of children under 15, does the Leader of the House understand the concern among the families of many of the victims of those brain tumours that cancer services for children have been relegated to the status of Cinderella, and are not being put centre stage in the provision of cancer services as they deserve to be? We need a debate, we need it soon, and we need an outcome.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising an important issue. I am well aware that it is often felt that cancer is not recognised as an illness that

threatens the lives of all of us, whatever our age. It is too frequently seen as a problem only for adults, but when a child suffers this appalling illness it is a terrible issue for parents, family and friends. It needs to be addressed properly, and I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health responds to the hon. Gentleman in an appropriate way.

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): I want to raise again the outbreak of the superbug clostridium difficile at Stoke Mandeville hospital, which is used by many of my constituents. Twelve patients have died and 300 have been infected. It is a very serious matter and my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), the shadow Secretary of State for Health, has called for an inquiry. The Leader of the House has said that the Secretary of State for Health is examining the matter. Will he please tell us when a Health Minister will come to the Dispatch Box and make a statement?

Mr. Hoon: I know that the health service has been in contact with the relevant trust and is offering advice on how to identify the precise nature of the outbreak and, obviously, how to contain it. It is important for us to allow its work to continue. The hon. Gentleman is right, however: the outbreak must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) (Con): May we have a debate on the financial situation in which primary care trusts find themselves? New Forest PCT is only one of many trusts that are running a deficit. We really do need an opportunity to examine claims that proposals to close services and withdraw beds represent not just financial savings but, somehow, new models of working needed to improve services—that, in some way, fewer means more.

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that the amount spent on health between the financial years 1996–97 and 2007–08 will have trebled. That is a remarkable achievement for any Government. I would feel somewhat more confident in the hon. Gentleman's objectivity if he paid tribute to that extra spending, rather than picking on particular details.

BILLS PRESENTED

Racial and Religious Hatred

Mr. Secretary Clarke, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Secretary Alan Johnson and Paul Goggins, presented a Bill to make provision about offences involving stirring up hatred against persons on racial or religious grounds: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday 13 June, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 11].

Civil Aviation

Mr. Secretary Darling, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Margaret Beckett, Ms Secretary Hewitt, Mr. Secretary Clarke, Mr. Secretary Hain, Secretary Alan Johnson, Ms Harriet Harman and Ms Karen Buck, presented a Bill to make further provision about civil aviation, including provision about the funding of the Air Travel Trust; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday 13 June, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 12].

Orders of the Day

Consumer Credit Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

12.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I begin my speech, let me welcome the hon. Members for Wealden (Charles Hendry) and for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) to their new positions.

The Bill represents a major step towards a fairer, more competitive 21st century credit market for both consumers and industry. For 30 years, the consumer credit market has contributed positively to the building of what is now a thriving economy. Responsible use of credit has allowed consumers to enjoy high standards of living, and at the same time business has flourished. But since the foundations of our current legislative framework were established in 1974, everything about the market—from the providers to the consumers and the products—has changed immeasurably. Through the Bill we can complete much-needed reforms, and equip the credit sector to meet the challenges of the modern market.

The United Kingdom has one of the strongest and most efficient credit markets in the world. It represents a quarter of the European Union credit market generally, and more than half the EU credit card market. For most consumers, credit is a useful tool. A combination of sensible borrowing and saving enables them to enjoy the freedom that credit gives: for example, to improve their homes or buy season travel tickets. However, unfair lending and ill-informed borrowing decisions can cause real problems for some people. Many of us will know from our constituency postbags the misery that can be caused by unscrupulous lenders who coerce people into credit agreements that they neither need nor understand.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this measure, which I know is very close to his heart; indeed, he has been desperate to get to the Dispatch Box to move this Second Reading. Getting in over one's head and into debt that one can no longer afford to pay drives some people into depression and, in other tragic cases, even to suicide. A main cause is the high interest rates that some companies can charge, over which there is little control. Can measures be introduced—if not in the Bill then perhaps by future ministerial order—to control interest rates, so that people do not get into such trouble?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention; he has a good track record in assisting constituents who get into such difficulties. The question of interest rate capping accompanied our pre-election discussions of the Bill and of the consumer credit White Paper. The Government do not consider capping to be the way forward, because there are many other hidden charges that can equally cause such misery. But I did undertake to keep the capping issue under review, and to examine it in the light of future developments and of our efforts through this Bill. However, at the moment there is no need for such caps.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Sutcliffe: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way; I am glad to note that he is giving a speech similar to that which he gave the last time we debated Second Reading of this provision. Let us hope that the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats stick to the position that they adopted before the general election. I want to push him on the issue of credit card cheques, on which he promised some movement. He will know that many credit card companies send people blank cheques, saying that all that they need do with such a cheque is to write in the figure and then cash it. Many do not understand that they might be entering into an agreement that, should they fall foul of it, could lose them their home. Will the Government try to ensure that the practice of issuing credit card cheques comes to an end?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He, too, has a good understanding of this issue; indeed, he was a member of the Standing Committee that previously discussed it. The unsolicited issuing of credit card cheques is a problem, and I undertake—as I did before—to consider introducing regulations and to discuss with the industry what can be done to stop the issuing of such cheques.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) (Lab): I note my hon. Friend's description of the Government's position on interest rate caps, but what exactly is the argument against introducing them? Does he honestly think that there is some ethical justification for major financial services companies levying interest rate charges of 25 to 29 per cent. per annum?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I understand why my hon. Friend raises this issue, but there is not enough time during a Second Reading debate to go through the detailed arguments surrounding it. If he catches the eye of the Whips, he can join the Standing Committee and we can then have this argument in greater detail. For example, we can explain why, in the light of evidence that we took from other countries, the interest rate cap does not work.

Mr. Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I understand what the Minister is saying about interest rate caps, but does he not accept that another problem exists—the calculation of annual percentage rates—that has been brought to our attention for the purposes of this debate by *Which?* Different methods of calculation can lead to the paying of very different rates of interest, even though they may seem similar. Does the Minister propose to deal with this problem?

Mr. Sutcliffe: The hon. Gentleman will know that last October, we introduced regulations concerning a single way of calculating APRs. The issue is causing confusion

to the consumer, and this Bill is about responsible lending and ensuring that consumers know their rights, but it is also about responsible borrowing.

Mr. John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Government and particularly the Minister on reintroducing this Bill so quickly. But as he knows, it was preceded by intense negotiations with the financial services industry, and despite the good measures in it, there are still problems with the definition of a single APR, with data sharing and with the issuing of unsolicited cheques. Will he work with the industry to ensure that such matters are dealt with? Transparency and competitiveness are at the heart of this Bill, and without transparency and an informed consumer, we cannot have a fully competitive market. Will the Minister ensure that the industry delivers on these issues, as it said it would?

Mr. Sutcliffe: My right hon. Friend chaired the Treasury Select Committee and I am grateful to him for the work that he and his colleagues have done on this issue. There is a team effort across government and across Parliament to ensure greater transparency on all these issues, and I undertake to continue to work with the industry in that regard. We wanted to introduce the Bill early in this Session in part because of the consensus that the industry and the various consumer groups reached on many of these issues. We have tried to maintain that consensus, and I agree with my right hon. Friend that we need to work with the industry on data sharing, for example. We will continue to do so.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I endorse entirely the comments of the right hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Mr. McFall), who chaired the Select Committee in the previous Parliament. Does the Minister accept that although we have made progress in achieving one method of calculating APR, that will achieve nothing in terms of transparency so long as there are 10 different methods of calculating interest, depending on when the calculation starts? There is no transparency, and consumers are therefore unable to compare one product with another.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I look forward to debating transparency, the unfairness credit test and associated issues with the hon. Gentleman in Committee.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Sutcliffe: I realise that various Members want to intervene, but I want to make a little more progress first.

As I was saying, many of us know from our constituency postbags the misery that can be caused by unscrupulous lenders who coerce people into credit agreements that they neither need nor understand. It is often society's most vulnerable members who are the victims. More than half of over-indebted households have incomes of less than £7,500 per year. Members of this House may be familiar with some of the worst examples of the shabby practices employed, such as the lender who coerced a couple suffering from mental illness into debts totalling £5,000; or the company that took advantage of a customer's mental health problems to sell him double-glazing, when all that he had requested was a cat-flap, saddling him with debts of £50,000. And as my hon. Friend the Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) said earlier, people have committed suicide because of the problems associated with debt. We simply cannot afford to stand idly by when faced with these predatory practices.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): I apologise for missing the first few seconds of my hon. Friend's speech, and I congratulate him on retaining the skills that he displayed in the Whips Office and on ensuring that this Bill was discussed at earliest possible moment. Will he make it clear to the House that the proposals on retrospectivity are still contained in this Bill—a fact that will be of great concern to those who have been through the process, but who were still the victims of extortionate loans? Will he also leave a little leeway in his thinking? The Meadows case, which gave rise to some of the thinking behind the Bill, comes up for appeal on Monday, so we might need to build in some slack, depending on what that judgment brings.

Mr. Sutcliffe: We will watch that case with interest, on which I cannot comment as it is going to appeal, as my hon. Friend says. The issue of retrospection is dealt with, and I want to make it clear that we have discussed, and continue to discuss, with the industry the problems associated with it. We will of course return to this issue in Committee.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast,North) (DUP): The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I, too, welcome the reintroduction of this very important Bill, which will provide greater protection for consumers. I want to press him on the question of late-payment charges. A constituent of mine who had a late bill of £33 was recently charged a late-payment fee £25. Will this Bill address such problems?

Mr. Sutcliffe: It will in some respects but not in every respect. However, the work of the Financial Services Authority, combined with the banking code, should resolve some of these problems. I shall return to the question of interest rate caps and hidden charges. We are trying to establish a transparent process through which the borrower knows exactly what the charges are and when they kick in. Indeed, the annual written statement enables the borrower to understand their position. This is a wake-up call to those in the industry, to ensure that unscrupulous ones cannot operate those hidden charges in the way that some of them have done in the past.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I want to reflect on the exchange that my hon. Friend had with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Mr. McFall) because a solution can be found with the industry. The savings sector of the industry publishes some very good, transparent information on websites and so on that helps people to make judgments about savings. A discussion between my hon. Friend's Department and the industry could achieve a vehicle to produce similar mechanisms to provide information to the consumer, perhaps using a web-based tool, thus making such things transparent and open for everyone.

Mr. Sutcliffe: My hon. Friend, who has an interest in these matters, shows that there are opportunities for

[Mr. Sutcliffe]

discussion with the industry and consumer groups to try to achieve a consensus on data sharing. I have always said that data-sharing procedures should not be used as a blanket to stop things happening. I am happy to initiate those discussions with the industry, and I am sure that they will take place.

Mr. Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being most generous in giving way. I wish to mention the principle according to which the more consumers borrow, the more that the credit card companies or other lenders allow them to borrow, thus pushing them to the very limit of affordability. Can he assure us that the Office of Fair Trading will look at that key issue when it considers lenders' credit competence?

Mr. Sutcliffe: Again, if my hon. Friend can contain himself, in a few minutes' time, I shall mention the OFT's powers in respect of what he outlines.

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his patience in giving way. All hon. Members know of his dedication to this issue: he is a champion of the consumer. Will he consider the possibility of linking interest rates to borrowers' earnings? I hate to labour the issue of capping interest rates, but a line must be drawn somewhere. After all, there are caps on speeding. Drivers try to get around them—they have all sorts of devices to spot speed cameras up ahead—but the fact is that those limits exist and drivers are hammered if they are caught breaking them. Obviously, lenders will try to get around the legislation, but they should know that they will be hammered if they get caught. That is the interesting feature about those caps.

Mr. Sutcliffe: Well, it looks as though there will be competition for the places on the Standing Committee. Clearly, the interest rate cap will take a number of sittings to consider. I understand where my hon. Friend is coming from, but I am not convinced about the argument that interest rate caps work. Our research shows that other interest rate caps around the world do not necessarily work, but I am sure that we will have an interesting debate on that issue. I am grateful to my hon. Friends for showing interest in that matter so early in my speech, thus revealing our concern, because we all represent consumers and people who have had problems.

The Bill builds on the progress that we have already made in terms of secondary legislation, initiatives for tackling over-indebtedness and pilot projects to tackle illegal money lending. We have standardised the ways that APRs are calculated, so that consumers can compare the costs of credit deals with confidence. We have ensured that proper information is given in adverts and contracts for credit products.

The trading standards pilot schemes that we have introduced and funded in Birmingham and Glasgow are demonstrating new ways to get tough with loan sharks and illegal moneylenders. The Bill represents the next step towards our vision to provide protection for consumers in a fair, clear and competitive credit market.

Reform of the existing legislation is long overdue. When the House passed the Consumer Credit Act 1974, only one credit card was available, on which consumers owed a total of around £32 million at today's values. Today, overall credit card borrowing is counted in billions, not millions, of pounds. Consumers can choose from well over 1,000 competing products from a wide range of providers.

We have faced some criticism for the time that it has taken to introduce the Bill, but I make no apology for taking time to get it right. We need to ensure that our changes make this complex and important market effective not just for today, but for the future, too. That is why we have consulted carefully with business, consumer groups and regulators, and their input has helped to get the Bill right.

The Bill is built around three key themes: enhancing consumer rights and redress, improving the regulation of consumer credit businesses and ensuring more appropriate regulation. Our first key goal is to enhance consumer rights and redress. The current tools available to consumers to obtain redress or to solve credit disputes are, at best, limited. Where disputes arise, consumers often have no option other than court action, which can be costly and time-consuming. Moreover, the chances of people winning cases under the existing extortionate credit test are slim, and there are few effective mechanisms for those people trapped in unfair agreements or subject to unfair lending behaviour to obtain redress.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, I have been concerned about unfair relationships, both from the consumer's point of view and from that of the reputable bits of the industry—for example, Nationwide and Barclaycard, which both have offices in Northampton. How does he intend to set out or negotiate the terms of the unfair relationship provisions? How would they be established? What lengths would the consumer and the industry have to go to in establishing whether a relationship was fair or unfair?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I shall address that issue in a few moments, so I hope that my hon. Friend will bear with me.

Consumers should have the right to challenge unfairness where it exists and obtain redress where appropriate. That is why the Bill will introduce a mandatory alternative dispute resolution system—an ADR scheme—for consumer credit matters, thus giving consumers a fast and effective means to challenge unfair practices without the need to resort to court action. Importantly, all consumers will have access to redress using the ADR scheme, not just those who can afford to pay for it, because it will be free and no lawyers are necessary—not that I have got anything against lawyers.

Decisions taken under the ADR scheme will also be binding on the consumer credit business, so that consumers can be confident that redress is achievable. The system will be run by the Financial Ombudsman Service—an independent and credible ADR scheme that already provides ADR under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. Thus the FOS already deals with approximately 75 per cent. of all consumer credit business by value.

Disputes that arise under the Consumer Credit Act 1974 will enter the ombudsman's jurisdiction on a phased basis, thus giving business time to prepare for the

new regime and ensuring that the FOS is not overwhelmed by consumer credit disputes. However, ensuring fairness on both sides of such disputes has been a key part of the Government's work on developing the system, so complaints will be considered by the FOS only when a lender's internal complaints-handling procedures have been exhausted. The FOS will be able to refuse any frivolous or vexatious claim.

The Bill will also empower consumers by replacing the out-of-date extortionate credit test. Too many people have found out the hard way that, 30 years after its introduction, the test does not provide effective redress. Not only does the current test set the bar too high to be of real use for consumers, but its application is usually confined to the cost of credit or terms of the credit bargain at the time it was made.

Hon. Members will appreciate that taking out a credit card or personal loan is not just about how much the agreement says that it will cost; there are many other factors to take into account. The Bill will introduce a new test based on the principle of unfairness, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble). Consumers will be able to apply to the courts to challenge agreements where an unfair credit relationship exists. That will allow the consideration of all aspects of the transaction, including the lender's conduct before and after making the agreement, its administration of the loan and the terms and conditions of the agreement. It will also ensure that the courts will have a wide discretion to assist those who face unfairness from lenders.

We have given careful consideration to the nature of the new unfair relationships test and have explored its implications thoroughly. If we are to give consumers the rights and redress mechanisms that they deserve, it is imperative that the test works effectively. It is also important that the test does not constrain or impede the courts' ability to do justice in every case. That is why I will not try to define an unfair relationship. It is for the courts to determine such things according to the relevant facts of each case. Unfairness is not a new concept for the industry, and fair lenders have nothing to fear from its introduction.

Norman Lamb: The Minister has said that he will not seek to define unfairness. Will the Department issue any guidance on the application of that test?

Mr. Sutcliffe: In anticipation of other challenges on that issue, hon. Members will know of the Pepper *v.* Hart judgment, whereby should Ministers try to give indications of constraints on certain issues when speaking at the Dispatch Box, their comments can be used by the courts and by others to stifle debate.

I do not want to do that. As I have said, the unfairness test is not a new concept for the industry. The contributions that Members will make in Committee will give us an opportunity to develop wider parameters that will be very clear when it comes to court cases. However, if we are too restrictive at this stage, there may be loopholes.

John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab): I also offer my hon. Friend a word of congratulation. We have struggled to get this Bill; we got far with it in the last Parliament and we are back again. We are trying to improve the law after 30 years of the 1974 Act, which was crippled by the use of the word "extortionate". Nobody could define the term, so there were no extortionate lenders and only 31 cases were brought in all that time. What worries some of us is that the unfairness test will remain as vague and will not result in cases being brought forward. Does he anticipate a test case setting the ground rules, or will individuals have to try to get to court to test the provision every time?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I hope that that will not be the case and that the alternative dispute resolution process will operate first and resolve the issues. When issues go to court, clearly the court will test the position. However, there will be advice, and the Office of Fair Trading will offer guidance on the issue. The unfairness test is already within the sector and parameters already exist, but I do not want the terms of the Bill to be restrictive. My right hon. Friend is right to suggest that the unfairness test is a lot lower bar than the extortionate credit test, which hardly anyone ever got over. We are now in a better position.

Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye) (Lab): My hon. Friend obviously does not want to make the case law today even though many of us wish that he would. Is not the issue that if the matter is left to the courts, the man on the Clapham omnibus will provide the test—an objective test? Credit, however, is very much a subjective problem, and poor people lose out. Does he not agree that the test should at the very least include the personal circumstances of the individual when determining whether a bargain is fair or unfair?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I do not entirely disagree with him. It is one of those issues that will become clearer as we discuss it further in Committee. Like the industry and consumer groups, I am prepared to listen to what hon. Members on both sides have to say. The last change to the law was 30 years ago, so this may be our only attempt to get things right. I want to get them right and make sure that vulnerable people are not exploited. Clearly a large percentage of the industry operate in a proper manner, but there are those who do not. We have to make sure that people are protected. We will have a thorough debate about the concept of unfairness. I resisted that temptation on numerous occasions during the previous process on the Bill. We shall see how we go on in the future.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is not the fact that it has taken 30 years to introduce new consumer credit legislation a good argument for at least introducing an enabling clause that would allow Ministers to introduce an interest ceiling if the evidence comes forward to convince them of the case for that; otherwise we might have to wait another 30 years before such a ceiling is introduced?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am confident that we will not have to wait 30 years, because consumer credit and the use of consumer credit have grown rapidly for the reasons that we have described. I know that the hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of the test and the cap before, and I gave him an undertaking last time. I shall make it clear that

[Mr. Sutcliffe]

there will be a review of the position if what we introduce does not work. I am very confident that the unfairness test and the ADR will work and that there will be no need for interest rate caps, but we will always keep that option open.

The Bill is about consumers being confident that they are borrowing from responsible lenders, and that is why our second objective is to improve the regulation of consumer credit businesses. The bureaucracy associated with licence renewals, together with limited information-gathering powers and lack of intermediate sanctions, hampers the Office of Fair Trading in running the licensing regime and in policing licence holders. Overhauling the licensing regime will produce a more streamlined system that is easier for the OFT to regulate and more proportionate for business. The OFT will be able to focus attention on problem lenders and problem sectors, and to impose sanctions on traders who misbehave. Consumers sometimes suffer as a result of a lack of information during the life of the loan.

Anne Snelgrove (South Swindon) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend considered outlawing the unfair order of payment on credit cards? That is a problem in my constituency and many others when constituents with 0 per cent. credit cards do not know that the cheapest debt is paid off first. They can therefore rack up extra debts without realising it. That has led to credit card providers making an estimated £500 million extra profit a year. In my constituency, the average debt for those who ask for help with debt is £35,000, so I hope that my hon. Friend will look into the matter.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I welcome my hon. Friend's contribution. Under the regulations that were introduced in October last year, we addressed the issue of transparency and the need to make sure that advertisements and agreements made it very clear what the interests rates were that people had to pay. However, I give her the assurance that we will continue to look at the issue.

I was referring to the lack of information to people during the life of a loan and especially when they fall into arrears. At present, lenders are not obliged to provide much information to consumers during the loan term, so the Bill has proposals to create minimum standards for lenders to provide regular account information and to tell consumers when they default and when they are charged. These reforms will ensure that lenders can be prevented from continuing any bad practices and, if necessary, excluded from the market, that responsible lenders can be regulated by light-touch regulation, and that consumers can have confidence in a competitive market.

Improving the standard of regulation is of no use, however, if that regulation does not do the job for which it is designed, so this brings me on to our third aim—to ensure that regulation is appropriate. Regulation must be appropriate and measured, ensuring comprehensive protection for consumers while allowing industry the flexibility to innovate. The UK has one of the most dynamic credit markets in the world but, to keep it that way, regulations must meet the needs of the market, the consumers and the industry. Making sure that consumers are protected is an important part of creating that fair and effective credit market. So the Bill provides comprehensive protection for consumers by removing the £25,000 financial limit, extending the protections of the Act to all consumer borrowing.

An extensive period of consultation has highlighted concerns about the impact of regulation on business lending and high net worth consumers. The Bill therefore provides protection where it is needed by maintaining the protections for small business lending up to and including £25,000, but excluding other business lending. The Bill allows industry flexibility, with exemptions allowing high net worth borrowers to opt out of regulation.

It is also important that lenders are confident that they are operating on a level playing field. Currently, many lenders are unfairly penalised for minor and insignificant technical errors to an agreement. The Bill makes the section 127 provisions on the enforceability of defective agreements more proportionate. Passing discretion to the courts will not remove consumer protection, because agreements are still unenforceable unless the court decides otherwise. However, it will increase fairness across the sector, and allow lenders to compete on the basis of best practice.

The Bill empowers consumers and encourages fair standards throughout industry.

Ms Keeble: My hon. Friend will recall that in the previous discussions, we raised issues about the money and advice that is provided. The procedures that he has outlined are extremely good, but consumers will need a lot of help to get through the process involved. Has he given thought to that?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I said at the outset that the Bill is part of a series of measures that the Government are introducing to support financial literacy, education and consumer protection.

Mr. Hepburn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I shall answer the point before I give way again.

The financial inclusion fund that was announced in the last Budget means that £45 million will be made available for consumer education. It is vital and will go to a variety of organisations that offer advice and support. Credit when used properly can be a useful tool, but we do not educate people about money from an early age. One of the issues with the financial inclusion fund will be to try to give education about the use of finance to all people from an early age.

Mr. Hepburn: Has the Minister thought about making representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for a windfall tax on the billions pounds of profits made by the high street banks every year so that we can fund an extension of credit unions that deal with a totally different market from the banks, which do not want to know about low-paid borrowers, and can also fund an education process so that people know the difference between priority and non-priority debts?

Mr. Sutcliffe: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. Credit unions are vital, we are supporting them

and we want them to develop, but I will leave making representations to the Chancellor on windfall taxes to my hon. Friend.

The Bill is built on principles of transparency, protection and fairness and sends a clear message to unfair and exploitative lenders that there is no place for them in our society. We have a clear vision of how a healthy consumer credit market should function, with responsibilities for both consumers and industry. We see consumers taking responsibility for controlling their finances, using credit sensibly and taking advice at the earliest opportunity. We see the industry providing consumers with the information that they need to make informed choices, lending responsibly and ensuring that advice and support are available for consumers in difficulty. The Bill sets the framework for that vision of a fairer, more competitive consumer credit market for the 21st century and I commend it to the House.

1 pm

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): I thank the Minister for the kind and courteous words with which he opened the debate and, in turn, welcome the Secretary of State to his new post. We had contact when he was Minister for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions and I had tremendous admiration for the way in which he carried out that role. I look forward to working closely with all the Department of Trade and Industry team in my new capacity.

The Conservative party welcomes the reintroduction of this important and overdue Bill to update our consumer credit legislation. Only one or two changes have been made to the Bill introduced in the last Parliament and the measure has broad support on both sides of the House, as well as from key consumer organisations and the credit industry itself. That is a strong working basis on which to take the Bill forward. I hope that the Minister enjoys that while he can because it is not often that the Government manage to maintain the confidence of even their own Back Benchers, let alone forge a broad consensus across the House.

The need for the Bill is clear. Current legislation governing the consumer credit industry is now seriously out of date and, as such, fails to provide consumers with the protection that they need in a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse and confusing credit market. We have already heard that confusion can be caused when people compare rates of interest calculated on different bases.

It is 31 years since the last consumer credit legislation was passed. In that time the credit landscape has changed out of all recognition, partly as a result of changing lifestyles and attitudes to debt, and certainly because of the liberalisation of financial markets, which has allowed a highly dynamic and sophisticated industry to develop. As the Minister told us, only one type of credit card was available in 1971, but today there are more than 1,300. Thirty years ago, £32 million was owed on credit cards, but today the figure is almost £50 billion.

Although that expansion has unquestionably increased competition, there has been a growth in some of the most unacceptable elements of the credit industry. As Members of Parliament, we have seen in our surgeries the consequences of irresponsible—or worse, rogue—lenders and extortionate credit agreements. We have seen such consequences destroying people's livelihoods, families and mental heath. In the worst cases people have tragically been driven to suicide because they have been unable to cope with the huge debts that they have built up. Such people include Stephen Lewis, who was highlighted in today's *Daily Mail*. He ran up debts of £70,000 on 19 different credit cards, despite earning just £22,000 a year. When he could no longer meet the repayments, he tragically took his own life, leaving a wife and two young children.

I pay tremendous tribute to the work of citizens advice bureaux and other debt advice organisations that help many individuals and families to deal with financial difficulties. Without those bodies, many more people would suffer the same sort of problems, which explains why we need the Bill to crack down on loan sharks, whose activities are often the cause of such difficulties. Those people often deliberately set out to deceive consumers.

Chris Bryant: When we considered the previous Bill in Committee in the last Parliament there was much debate about loan sharks. Of course everyone abhors those who use such ostensibly foul practices. However, the difficulty is that we have such a competitive market now that many of the credit card and personal loan companies are scrabbling around in a fairly small pond to try to get the few extra remaining people, so many of the marketing techniques that they use go well beyond what most of us would accept as normal practice. That rarely comes to light because it is the loan sharks that get in the newspapers and those companies are perfectly respectable in all other regards. Does the hon. Gentleman hope that marketing practices such as sending people unsolicited pre-approved applications for credit cards and personal loans will be done away with?

Charles Hendry: I shall come on to that point. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and hope that he can be persuaded to serve on the Committee yet again. He addresses extremely important issues and the sort of problems that need to be stamped out. There is no doubt that most people practising in the field operate reasonably and responsibly, but if people step over a mark, they need to know that legislation will be there to clamp down on certain activities.

Debt itself is not bad, as the Minister said, but unaffordable debt certainly is. As we have learned, debt that is affordable one year might not be the next if employment circumstances, people's income or interest rates change significantly. That explains why we should be worried about the growing level of debt in Britain, which is rising at a staggering £1 million every four minutes. That means that personal debt has already risen by £10 million during the course of the debate. In 2004 alone, debt increased by £116 billion, which was the largest single increase in debt since the Bank of England was founded in 1694. According to the charity Credit Action, total personal debt in Britain has broken through the £1.1 trillion barrier. As my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said when he was shadow Chancellor:

"It took 600 years of banking history for household debt to reach half a trillion pounds. Now, under seven years of Labour, this has doubled."

Mr. Sutcliffe: I want to try to keep the consensus going, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that 80 per cent. of the trillion-pound figure is mortgage repayments.

Charles Hendry: I understand what the Minister is saying, but we feel that there is a tendency to be complacent. We see today from the *Daily Mail* shocking statistics showing a sharp increase in the number of people falling behind in their debt repayments. Credit card arrears and bad debts are growing and bankruptcies and home repossessions are up by a quarter. Appeals to the consumer credit counselling service are up by 60 per cent. since last year. Although most people are managing, there is evidence that a significant and growing minority are unable to manage.

John Battle: I, too, served on the Committee that considered the previous Bill and, as the hon. Gentleman probably knows, I have taken an interest in the matter for some time. I sincerely welcome the Conservative party's approach on the Bill, but I wonder whether he will go an extra yard in the direction that I would like to push the Minister. In addition to having an unfair lending test, I would be interested in building into the Bill a responsible lending test to put an onus on those lending money to act more responsibly. At the moment they can slide away from that responsibility, which is why we see stories such as that in the *Daily Mail*. I do not blame the borrowers for that, but the lenders.

Charles Hendry: I hope that we can address that important matter in Committee, although we must be clear about whether such a test could be legally enforceable. Several aspects of the Bill are worrying because the court will be left to decide where boundaries lie, but there are clearly practices on which we want to clamp down, so we will need to consider in Committee how best to achieve that.

According to research carried out for the DTI and announced this week, 9 per cent. of people spend more than half their income on credit repayments. According to Credit Action, the average amount owed by every man, woman and child in the UK is approximately £18,000. Research by Datamonitor reveals that consumer borrowing for each adult in the UK through credit cards, motor and retail finance deals, overdrafts and unsecured personal loans has risen to more than £4,000, which is an increase of 10 per cent. in just one year and almost 50 per cent. since 2000.

Although growing debt is an international issue, it has risen faster here than elsewhere. According to the Bank of England, household debt is now 140 per cent. of aggregate income, which is above the level in the United States and most European countries. Indeed, the Bank also confirms that UK household debt is rising at 15 per cent. per year, which is more than in the United States and most European countries. Against that background, it is hardly surprising that the Bank has warned of the consequences of further borrowing by saying:

> "The continuing rapid build up of debt by many borrowers . . . may be building up vulnerabilities."

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the hon. Gentleman recognises that about 80 per cent. of household debt is mortgage debt. As a proportion of monthly income, it amounts to only 7 per cent. under this Government, whereas it amounted to 15 per cent. under the previous Conservative Government.

Charles Hendry: The Minister made the same point. I am saying that when such debt is affordable, it is fine, but people are beginning to find it unaffordable. According to the figures announced today, there has been a 25 per cent. increase in mortgage repossessions. I was in the House with the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) in the 1990s and was involved in homelessness issues when there was the horrific problem of repossession. Our anxiety is that although most people can afford to repay their debts, there are indications that that may not be the case for long.

We look to the Minister to reassure the House that the Government have truly understood the problems that rising debt can cause. I fear that that might be too much to hope, however, because the Government are a serial borrower. If ever there was a case for debt counselling, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who spends as if there were no tomorrow, and the Government, whose top-up fees mean that hundreds of thousands of young people will start their working lives with average debts of £30,000.

Even today—I know that the Minister wants consensus, but that is not always possible—there is a new report, showing that a quarter of parents have to borrow more because their children cannot afford to move away from home in their 20s and 30s because of their high debt. The very same Government have raided our pensions, undermined our savings culture, forced through tax rise after tax rise and taken away more and more of people's hard-earned money. It is little wonder that so many people are getting into debt to alleviate the financial difficulties that Government actions have caused.

We are all rightly concerned about some of the practices designed to encourage people to take on extra debt, especially if they cannot afford it. To pick up on the comments by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), I imagine that all of us have been offered increases in our credit card levels without the most basic checks having been made to determine whether we could afford to spend up to that amount. I have a credit card on which I typically spend about £200 a month. Gradually over the years, the company has given me a credit limit of £3,500 without checking whether I can afford to repay that amount. How can it be responsible lending to encourage people to borrow without checking that they can afford to pay back the money when the time comes? I hope that we address that in Committee.

I also hope that we can address the point made by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about credit card cheques, which is when card providers issue their customers with so-called convenience cheques that draw on their credit card. What is not made clear to customers is that spending on those cheques is usually at a higher rate of interest than that charged for normal use of the card, with a shorter interest-free period or none at all and without the protection that applies to credit card spending under section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. In many cases, the cheques are issued without the customer having requested them. Again, the Committee must address that.

Hon. Members have spoken of their support for placing a ceiling on interest rates. Although such a move may sound superficially attractive, it would prove damaging for the consumer. Comparative research carried out for the Department of Trade and Industry across European countries and in those US states where rate caps already exist show clearly that such a measure drives down product diversity and causes lenders to withdraw from the market. That reduces choice and access for consumers. In France and Germany, for example, it drives borrowers to make greater use of illegal lenders than we do in the UK, where there are legal credit options for such borrowers.

Michael Jabez Foster: Is it not the case that very high interest rates usually reflect the fact that the loan should not have been made? That is the issue. If lenders were barred from charging a high interest rate, they would be out of the market. I acknowledge, of course, the problem of illegal lending.

Charles Hendry: It is also the case that the APR is not necessarily a good way to make that judgment. If I borrowed £50 from the hon. Gentleman and paid it back in 20 instalments of £3 a week—a total of £60—that would be a reasonable way of repaying the debt, but it would have an APR of 153 per cent. We need to look carefully at the problem. What seems like a high APR is sometimes a reasonable approach because of the sums involved.

The picture of indebtedness in the UK makes clear the need for an effective legislative framework to ensure that consumers are given adequate protection and that the credit industry is sufficiently transparent and works fairly and efficiently for all persons involved. The Bill presents us with a valuable opportunity to create that framework. Its objectives to enhance consumer rights and redress, to strengthen the regulation of consumer credit businesses and to provide debtors with clear, accurate and regular information about their credit agreements are the right way forward. That is why the Conservative party offers its broad support for the Bill, but as it currently stands, it is far from perfect. Indeed, some significant issues must be addressed if it is to reach its potential and ensure that the interests of the consumer are not inadvertently damaged.

By far the most pressing issue is the lack of detail, particularly in relation to a number of the key proposals. That is disappointing to say the least. The same criticisms were made by the Conservative party, the industry and consumer groups when the Bill was first debated in January, but in five months nothing has been done to provide that detail. That must make us question the Minister's comments on Second Reading in the last Session, when he said:

> "The reason that the Bill has taken so long is that it is important that all stakeholders—the industry, consumer groups and the voluntary sector—move forward together."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2005; Vol. 429, c. 471.]

All of us will find it disappointing that we have not moved forward rather more since he said those words.

Clause 19 replaces current provisions on extortionate credit terms with a new unfair relationship test. It widens the scope of circumstances that the courts may take into account in deciding whether a credit agreement is unfair to a debtor. That is a welcome move, but the Bill fails to offer any definition or examples of what constitutes an unfair relationship. Without such definition, neither creditors nor debtors will ever fully understand their responsibilities and rights. For a Bill that intends to increase consumer protection, that is a fundamental flaw. As Lloyds TSB explains:

> "The Bill introduces a new unfair credit relationship test, which means consumers can challenge unfair practices and terms in court. However, the meaning of 'unfair relationship' is vague and the scope of the provision is generally too wide for both consumers and creditors".

It goes on:

> "The Bill contains no guidance for consumers as to what constitutes 'fair' or 'unfair' to enable them to identify when they have a valid claim. Similarly, there is no guidance for creditors on how they should conduct themselves to ensure that their actions are not 'unfair'. Unlike comparable legislation in respect of unfair contract terms or financial regulation, there is not even a non-exhaustive list of relevant factors."

The Minister talked today of his desire to change the system of redress and to remove that from the courts, but the lack of detail means that people will have to go to court, with the years of waiting and the stress that that involves, to find out whether they have been treated unfairly.

Both the Unfair Contract Terms Act 1977 and the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999 demonstrate that it is possible to give significant guidance to consumers and creditors by means of a non-exhaustive list of the factors that are relevant to an assessment of fairness. There is, therefore, no reason why a clear standard could not also be applied for this Bill. The Government know full well that that was a major issue when it was introduced in the last Session. They have had five months to pad out the detail, yet they have done nothing. That is far from trivial. A legal opinion from Michael Beloff QC finds that the test as currently drafted breaches the requirement in the Human Rights Act 1998 of legal certainty in article 1 of the first protocol. I should be grateful if the Minister would clarify the situation.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that most of the argument on whether terms were unfair concentrated not on terms of enforcement on the poor, but on things such as late payment fees for credit cards and the mis-selling of payment protection insurance and gap insurance. Those are major sources of revenue for big firms—credit card firms in particular—and cause enormous annoyance to consumers. Why should the courts not be able to interpret what is unfair or fair in such circumstances? Has he no faith in the competence of the courts?

Charles Hendry: The problem is that with the lack of clarity, lenders will withdraw from lending to certain categories of people. They will pull back in a way that is unhelpful to consumers. They know that it will take years—perhaps three, four or five—to bring a case to court. There will then be appeals and it will take time to prove whether something was unfair or not. Throughout that time, they will exercise much greater caution than would have been necessary had there been greater clarity.

John Battle: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the lack of clarity, but I come to it from a completely different angle. The people I represent who get into debt go nowhere near the court because the lender reschedules the debt and gives them even more money—that is how it works—so they are not given the opportunity to go to court to get redress in the first place. We will have a vague definition of unfairness and the court will be there in the background, but the people I represent will not be able to make use of it to get justice and fairness. We need clear guidelines on unfairness to send out a signal so that people do not go to court because everybody knows what they are dealing with.

Charles Hendry: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that for many people, particularly those on low incomes, the prospect of going to court and taking on a major financial institution must be terrifying, so they will try to use any means to avoid that. One reason why the existing legislation on extortion has not been used more is that many settlements have been made on the steps of the courtroom, where people decide to settle before the matter gets to court. If we can get the detail into the Bill, we can avoid many of those problems.

Most importantly, this is not just an issue of concern to lenders; it is, as we have said, the consumers whom we seek to protect who will suffer most from the lack of detail. If the parameters are not clear, lenders will become more cautious in their lending to ensure that, some years down the line, they do not find that they have inadvertently operated in an unacceptable way. That extra caution is exactly what will drive people to more unscrupulous lenders. Moreover, that is not just a concern of lenders. As the charity Credit Action points out, on behalf of consumers:

"The presumption that all relations are 'unfair' unless proved otherwise is in itself unfair, excessive and contrary to normal British law."

We are also concerned by the way that the Bill will apply the unfair relationship test retrospectively, to those existing agreements that will continue beyond a transitional time frame. As yet, that time frame has not been decided, which leaves both consumers and the industry wholly uncertain about the extent to which the test may apply to their agreements. Without detail over what constitutes an unfair relationship test, neither creditors nor consumers are in a position to know whether their existing agreements could be open to reinvestigation.

We also have concerns about the extended scope of the financial ombudsman service. One of the Bill's fundamental aims is to improve redress for consumers, and that is right, but on the "Money Box" programme recently, the ombudsman himself said that he had real concerns about his office's capacity to cope with the volume of work. There is no question that the provisions in the Bill will add to that work, so we must question whether it has the capacity to achieve what it sets out to do.

The Bill, in its efforts to improve regulation of the credit industry, also proposes an expanded role for the Office of Fair Trading to regulate the conduct of licensees. Clause 38 provides for the imposition of requirements on licensees if the OFT feels unsatisfied with the licensee's work; clause 46 allows the OFT access to premises and documentation; and, ultimately, clause 52 allows the OFT to impose civil penalties, comprising fines of up to £50,000, on those who do not comply with its requirements.

My colleagues and I will support measures to improve the regulation of the credit industry—that is an important step towards protecting consumers' rights—but we will be able to protect their rights only if that regulation is transparent. Clause 30 states:

"The OFT shall prepare and publish guidance in relation to how it determines, or how it proposes to determine, whether persons are fit persons".

As yet, despite repeated calls, that guidance has not been published. How then, is Parliament supposed to agree that this measure is the right one to take, if it does not know how the measure will be carried out in practice?

Indeed, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, in its fifteenth report of the last Session, expressed its concerns regarding the power to impose requirements on licence holders. The Committee concluded that the

"unfettered scope of this power fails to satisfy the requirements of reasonable legal certainty and also gives rise to a risk of disproportionate use of the power in practice. We are therefore concerned that this provision as currently drafted, without greater specificity, gives rise to a significant risk of incompatibility with Article 1 of Protocol 1."

Whether or not that is the case, and I would be grateful if the Minister clarified the situation when he sums up, the fact remains that the accountability of the regulator is inevitably limited. If we hand more powers to a regulator, accountability must be decreased, and if we decrease accountability, we cannot be improving transparency. Without transparency, how can the Government ever claim to be increasing protection for the consumer?

As Credit Action makes clear:

"The role given to the OFT is very strong. In many ways they will be acting as both prosecutor and judge and this could easily lead to an un-level playing field. The detail of on-going monitoring obligations are not included in the Bill and will be left fully in the hands of the OFT, with further guidance being issued at a later stage. It is the view of Credit Action that the powers given to the OFT which includes 'the right to monitor as it sees fit, businesses being carried on under licences' are excessive."

We must also make sure that any regulations made under this Bill can stand the test of time and do not undermine innovation and progress in the consumer credit industry. Just as the nature of credit has changed beyond recognition since the introduction of the Consumer Credit Act 1974, it will change just as much in the years to come, especially as new technology provides more and more opportunities to do things differently. Many new ideas are emerging in the field of lending and borrowing at present, such as the work being undertaken by companies such as Zopa, which is using the internet in a manner that totally changes the way in which people borrow and lend money.

These changes could be of great benefit to both lenders and consumers, particularly those on lower incomes, and we have to be certain that excessive regulation does not stifle this type of innovation. The OFT's role must afford flexibility. The vast majority of consumers deal with credit sensibly and they should be granted the choice and freedom to handle their financial affairs how they choose.

Again, the issue stems from a lack of detail and a great deal of uncertainty about the consequences of the proposals in the Bill. Will the Minister ensure that the OFT guidance and publications are made available before the Bill goes into Committee? I simply do not see how otherwise we can fully address the issue of the OFT's extended role.

If the Bill is indeed about increasing transparency, then it should naturally also be about reducing unnecessary red tape. In certain places, however, I fear that it goes against that aim. In particular, the Bill will require lenders to send arrears notices to consumers when, in aggregate, a borrower, particularly one on weekly repaid credit, owes four weeks' worth of repayments. In principle, as the Minister said earlier, that sounds a logical measure, but in practice it may have some absurd implications for home credit borrowers. Some 3 million people borrow on a home credit basis, and on average each customer will miss four payments at certain points, in many cases at staggered points, in the course of a credit agreement. In doing so, however, they will not incur one extra pound of debt, as the repayment formula is designed to be flexible. The Bill could mean that all 3 million customers would have to be issued with formal, written arrears notices, when in reality they would not be in arrears at all. What a terrible waste of time, money and resources that would be. I hope that the Minister will comment on the fact that there could be no better way to frighten people, particular those on low incomes, than to tell them in writing that they are in arrears when they are not.

The final concern that I want to raise at this stage is that of the implementation timetable for the Bill—or rather the current lack of one. The 1974 Act took six years to implement fully, which is indicative of the substantial changes that regulatory measures represent for credit companies. Clearly, these measures are unlikely to take as long to implement, but there are nevertheless serious implications, particularly for IT systems, as a result of some of the proposals, especially those requiring regular information and statements to be sent to debtors.

Without a clearly defined timetable for commencement of the new rules, the credit industry is, at present, unaware of how long it will be given to implement the changes required. The lack of detail in the Bill only makes that worse. Without that detail, companies are unable to assess accurately and reliably what changes they will need to make to their processes and systems and how long they may take to introduce. There is little doubt that a short, unrealistic timetable will not be in the interests of the consumer. As Credit Action states:

"Undue rushes in attempted implementation could lead to corners being cut, staff not being properly re-trained, and thus the purpose of the Bill being somewhat undermined."

In the interests of the consumer, the Minister must give us a clear timetable for the implementation of the Bill, before it reaches the statute book, and ensure that a realistic period is allowed for the industry to adapt.

I have set out why the Bill is so timely and important. The credit industry has changed dramatically over the past 30 years and continues to change at an equally fast pace now. To protect the many millions of consumers who have products and agreements with credit companies, it is essential that a new legislative framework is adopted that offers more rights and means of redress, better regulation of businesses and a fairer and more efficient industry for all.

The Conservative party therefore lends its broad support to the Bill, but, as I have explained, not without reservations. There is insufficient detail, and failure to provide that could have a series of unintended consequences for consumers which could end up doing more damage than good. That would be a perverse outcome for the Bill. No one wants to see that happen, and I look to the Minister and his colleagues to work with us, rather than against us, in Committee—and I welcome his commitment to do that—and beyond, to ensure that we deliver a Bill that truly helps the consumer, without undermining the businesses that provide the service.

1.30 pm

John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab): I welcome the early reintroduction of the Consumer Credit Bill in this new Parliament. It is a good framework. I add a word of congratulation to my hon. Friend the Minister, who is still with the Bill and has managed to get it before the House. Some of us have put a lot of work into the Bill, which made good progress during the previous Parliament with contributions from Opposition Members. We got a shape and a framework, and we now have a chance to get it right, as the Minister put it, and to improve it.

I agree however with the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) about the timetable for implementation. We are reforming an Act that was passed in 1974 and we need the Bill to become law quickly, because delays while people wait for stronger regulation condemn thousands of the poorest and most needy in our communities to increasing, crippling debt burdens. We cannot wait for ever to get it perfect; we need some action to give people protection while their debt builds up daily.

In July 1999, the Government first stated their intention to bring the Consumer Credit Act 1974 up to date so that there would be better protection of consumers. With the publication of the White Paper, "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" in July 2001, the then Minister, Melanie Johnson, announced a public consultation with these words:

"Our credit laws are over thirty years old and need a radical overhaul to protect people in today's credit market. This is a top priority for the government."

It was a top priority in 2001, and the years are starting to tick by. She then stressed:

"Consumers need to know what they are letting themselves in for when they sign up for credit. The expensive catch shouldn't be hidden in microscopic text. It should be explained up front by the lender. We will need to take action to protect vulnerable customers who are preyed on by rogue traders and make sure that consumers get clearer and understandable information so that they know exactly what they are getting into before they sign on the dotted line."

We all assent to that, but we need to get on with it. I make that plea to the Minister. We should not just reintroduce the Bill but get it through Committee—properly scrutinised; I will argue for it to be strengthened—and on to the statute book so that there is some action out there to protect people.

[John Battle]

Five years later, we have had widespread consultation and the White Paper, which has all been welcome. A consensus has built up around the Bill, which is why we are where we are today. Yet for the poorest in our society, such as those in Leeds, West, who are forced to borrow for the basics from doorstep money lenders or to go to the cash-converter shop in Armley in my constituency, the situation is worsening as we speak, deliberate and debate. Their debts are compounding and unfair relationships are deepening into increasing and real desperation. That is why we need regulation and good regulation quickly.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I do not want to interrupt the thrust of my right hon. Friend's remarks and I agree that we need to get the legislation on the statute book, but he will acknowledge the Government's work across the piece on financial inclusion, and the regulations that we introduced in October. So it is not a case of waiting for the Bill to come along.

John Battle: I accept and welcome that. In fact, my hon. Friend underplayed his and the Government's work on funding credit unions and financial advice. I accept that that is all part of the effort to tackle financial exclusion.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Government feel very strongly about this matter. I am sorry that I missed the introductory statement by my hon. Friend the Minister, but I was elsewhere. One thing that has yet to be addressed is the fact that the very poorest often have additional charges imposed on them as a default, partly because they are unable to protect themselves. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to pay attention to that?

John Battle: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. To be fair to the Minister, in arguments on capping interest rates, that is precisely the problem. What is the point of capping interest rates at 30 per cent. if the APR is 29.9 per cent., but behind the interest rate are charges for default, late payment, not meeting the man with a dog who comes to the door on the right afternoon, and so on? We should look at this issue in the round. I know that the Minister is taking that on board. We could do more in Committee on the detail to get the right shape of Bill so that it gives confidence to good lenders in the industry, drives out the worst and protects the poor.

I want to focus on greater protection for consumers who borrow money, especially the poorest 10 per cent. in Britain who use home credit at some time in their lives. Such people are especially vulnerable to high-cost credit lenders—to interest as well as the extra charges to which my hon. Friend referred. Those without a bank account or a credit card have to turn to lenders at the door or to advertisements for cash on the television or in the newspapers, because they have no alternative way of getting the money that they need. They end up paying most to borrow money—more than the rest of us. They pay the highest price to get the basics for their families.

In the heavy world of economics, we hear of financial shocks coming along, but for a family in the everyday world, that shock could involve the arrival of a new baby. Someone might need a pushchair or a carry-cot or extra provisions. If a relationship breaks down, a young mother might have to set up another home for her children and to buy a sofa, bed, cooker, fridge, curtains and carpets. Those are the financial shocks in the everyday world. A youngster changing school might need a new school uniform and extra clothing. Just a few hundred pounds is a financial shock to people managing on very low incomes.

At first sight and under such pressure, a weekly repayment of £4.99 might look a good deal, but in reality weekly repayments to home loan companies, credit stores and cash-converter businesses involve a huge rack-up of compounding annual percentage interest rates and, as my hon. Friend said, penalty charges which are sometimes hardly noticeable in the small print. Paying back £4.99 over 156 weeks can mean paying £432.38 to borrow the money. A person borrowing £1,000 will pay £700 interest. That is a massive rack-up and we should tackle that. The lending system is locking the poorest into long-term poverty which they cannot break out of.

It is tragic to see in Armley in my constituency people traipsing into the garishly painted Western Union cash converter shop—as if it is out of cowboy land, as it inadvertently and ironically advertises itself—asking for their pension books or child benefit cheques to be held for cash so that they can go across the road to Kwik Save for the goods for the weekend. I am not against people borrowing money, but I want responsible borrowing that balances the budget and I do not want people to be ripped off by being overcharged. We need to address that.

In a special investigative report in last Sunday's edition of *The Observer* entitled "Living on £3 a Day", there was a detailed account of the Family Welfare Association—a charity that helps people who have no money—dealing with requests for support from applicants who are trying to get by on £3 a day. The chief executive, Helen Dent, commented:

> "It is difficult for us to understand what it is like not to be able to replace your children's bedding. There are families who have no capacity to save".

A family cannot save on £3 a day. All that is far from the lifestyle of shopping for fashionable clothes in Harvey Nicks in Leeds, listening to iPods, drinking in chic bars or dining in gastropubs. It is a completely different world. We need regulatory action to give support to people in that world.

Mr. Austin Mitchell: I strongly agree with what my right hon. Friend is saying. The poor and the less well off face a major problem, but the problem extends more widely than that. Lenders check whether people are a good credit risk by ascertaining whether there is a record of default. If there is no such record, no regard will be given to the income and the other obligations of the borrower. The Office of Fair Trading has the ability to issue notes on responsible lending. It should have a responsibility also to issue enforceable and abiding guidance on what responsible lending is.

John Battle: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As a practical suggestion, we could build into the Bill a responsible lending test. That would put pressure on the industry not to go out and lend.

In November 1999, the Treasury—it was the policy action team—published a report in which it estimated that 1.5 million low-income households had no traditional access to bank accounts. They had no access to what we call regular lending services. Such people are at the mercy of the people on the street and the adverts. In November 2004, the DTI, in its full regulatory impact assessment, in the context of the previous consumer credit Bill, estimated that 9 million customers lacked the credit rating needed to borrow mainstream products from high street lenders. However, all those people are getting credit. What is going on? Why is the market not regulated? There is serious financial exclusion for a huge swathe of the population. These people are forced to live not from day to day but from tomorrow to tomorrow. They do so with fear. They dread getting out of bed the next day. Their debts build up and overwhelm them.

What about responsible lenders? Who is helping those who find themselves in that position? Should not lenders play a part instead of saying, "It's their problem. Let them go to a citizens advice bureau and sort out their debts." No. We need to go down the road that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has suggested. Millions of low-income families rely on credit with high interest rates. Lenders pay scant regard to their ability to pay. The sub-prime market, as it is called, with its huge and excessive default charges, catches out far too many people. There is the pay-day lending system, with interest rates of more than 100 per cent. APR. Door-to-door lenders routinely roll over loan charges for home collection and charge not only interest rates but special charges for a "personal service". The structure locks people into a spiral of increasing indebtedness, and effective regulation is needed.

I agree that most consumer credit businesses treat consumers fairly. I am in favour of credit business as a whole, and most companies comply with their current statutory obligations. However, there are unscrupulous consumer credit businesses that ruthlessly exploit the poor. We should be getting a grip on them. We need to tackle unfairness in any aspect of the consumer credit relationship. That is in the Bill. We need to root out misleading and unfair selling methods, including irresponsible lending. We have gone some way towards that in the Bill. We need transparency in the way in which fees and charges are applied to accounts. We have gone some way in the Bill to getting there. We need to prevent unfair treatment of accounts in arrears. That is somewhere in the Bill. We need a system of effective redress. That is in the Bill. The germs are there but they could be strengthened. The Bill goes much of the way to addressing these issues.

It is proposed to replace extortionate lending with the unfair relationship test. The extortionate lending provision did not work. After 30 years of the previous Act, only 31 cases were brought before the courts to reopen an extortionate credit bargain. Most of those who were in difficulties could not bring their cases to court. They could not get there because the process was too complicated, too expensive and too risky. We should not replace a test and at the same time continue with lack of access to the court. The court might be there, the law might be there, but nobody can make use of the facility to secure protection.

The courts interpreted extortionate lending too narrowly. I understand why my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby is saying, "Don't tie us down there again. Leave it broad." He is saying that that creates space. Between total openness and narrowness must be some space for specifying what the unfair relationship test should be.

My hon. Friend the Minister might say that we should leave the matter to the wisdom of the courts and that we should not tie their hands. There is sense in that. My worry, however, is that poor borrowers in debt do not get anywhere near the courts to sort out their debts. In reality, they are not usually taken to court for non-payment of a debt. Their loans are rolled over into future borrowing and lending. They are told, "You can have another loan to see you over." The spiral of indebtedness increases without the borrower getting near a court.

Borrowers do not want to go to court. They prefer to tie themselves into more debt. Low-income borrowers are not likely to seek court action. They will not receive legal aid. They cannot go before a court to allege unfairness or to try to seek enforcement of their rights as set out in the Bill. They will not see a court as a place that they can use to get redress. It is difficult for them to go before a court. Low-income borrowers may be in court for other matters—for example, not paying other bills. They do not see a court as being on their side. There must be real opportunities to ensure that poor borrowers have effective redress.

The Minister might say that the alternative is to go to the ombudsman. There are two caveats here. There has been good discussion before the introduction of the Bill, and I am not saying that the Bill will not work. However, there is a problem that needs to be ironed out. If the ombudsman has an office in London, and only London, the procedure will not be much use in Leeds and Bradford. People will not traipse down to London to sort out their problems with the ombudsman. The structure must be examined. A more fundamental point is that the ombudsman will wait for court decisions on what is unfair before settling disputes. The courts will be used first. We are still locked into the court being the key in defining the unfair relationship test.

Mr. Mitchell: By expanding my hon. Friend's point, I think that the argument will be elucidated. There is a further problem, in that the ombudsman does not rule on price—in other words, on interest rates. That is clearly central to the problem of unfairness. The ombudsman would have to be given powers in that area.

The fairness doctrine improves matters, in that it creates a fear in large organisations that they will be taken to court and that something can be ruled unfair. That is especially important for credit card consumers who often face what I regard as unfair and heavy charges for late payment, or for exceeding a credit limit. Such charges build up. A fear will be instilled in credit companies that they might be taken to court and that they should be cautious.

John Battle: I share my hon. Friend's concerns. With respect to other right hon. and hon. Members, I am not a lawyer. I fear legislation that we in this place deliver into the hands of lawyers, who live off the face of it for

[John Battle]

ever. It does not reach the areas where it is needed. I do not want legislation introduced that leads to a row about the role of the court. I want to know how there will be free access so that poor people can arrive at a resolution when they feel that they are being unfairly treated. That is my main aim. My hon. Friend the Minister might care in Committee to spell out the alternative dispute resolution scheme and explain how that can help. We need clarity. I need to be able to tell my constituents, "This is how the system works. This is who you go to to get help and to sort out the so-and-so who comes round and overcharges you."

Norman Lamb: Speaking as a lawyer, may I ask whether the hon. Gentleman agrees that it is better for Parliament to be setting a framework for how the term "unfairness" is to be interpreted, rather than a court setting precedents?

John Battle: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is on side, although he is a lawyer. The focus of our discussion must be to ensure that people are clear. The hon. Member for Wealden, who leads for the Opposition, said that businesses need to be clear. My point is that that applies also to the poor. Between us, I think that we have an agreement that can be clarified within the law. I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that that work needs to be done.

Those who lend to people without taking account of their ability to pay should be drawn into the same regulatory process as mortgage lenders and court fines. The Lord Chancellor has made it clear that if someone goes to the magistrates court because they have not paid their council tax for whatever reason, the fine, to be effective, must be proportionate to their income or their ability to pay. There is no point in giving someone who owes £135 in council tax a £500 fine, as they do not have the money to pay it. The Lord Chancellor proposed that fines should be proportionate. Why on earth does that not apply to the lenders? A responsible lending test should be built into the Bill, so that the lenders cannot get away with repeatedly lending to people without undertaking an assessment of their ability to pay back the loan. Such tests are included on mortgage forms, so why do we not include them on loan forms, especially as people are sometimes lent more than they are given for their mortgage?

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): My hon. Friend is quite right. Credit rating is vital in business, and must be in place before one business provides a service to another. It is eminently sensible to apply that test to individuals who are seeking to borrow money.

John Battle: I agree, as would the majority of lenders in the business. They want to drive the worst lenders out of the marketplace, and would support a programme in which people must provide accurate, up-to-date information about their ability to repay so that repayment judgments can be made before they are lent money. We must then implement a panoply of financial advice, including on budget management. We must make sure that programmes are available in schools and neighbourhoods so that people can learn to manage their budget. Ironically, society is much more willing to discuss sex than debt—it is the great no-no. Part of the problem is that people will not admit how much they are in debt, and are ashamed of their debts.

As the Minister knows, we have had lengthy discussions about unjustifiably high interest rates. I still believe that the Government should serve notice in the Bill that if lenders exceed a market rate they will be penalised. The Minister said that interest rates will be kept under review, but I would like a reserve power to be introduced. If he thought the rate was too high he could draw on that power instead of being in a position where rates might be reviewed by his successors in the next 30 years. I would like to hurry that along, but it is open to debate. The Minister will wish to make his own arguments, so perhaps we should clarify the position at a later stage.

In conclusion, the concept of an unfair credit test must be clarified. We should introduce a responsible lending test for lenders so that the poor are not driven further into debt without protection. There should also be a reserve power to cap interest rates in future. I welcome the Bill, which provides a good framework. Much good work has already been done by Members of all parts of the House, and the Bill has widespread support. We must, however, make some of its definitions clearer. We must make sure that it is not an impotent measure in the background; but most importantly, we must put it on the statute book quickly so that people have redress and protection. Some individuals are enduring unsustainable debts and pay the highest price of all to borrow money for basics for their families. They should not be forced to live in financial misery for a single day longer.

1.53 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I agree with much of what the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) said. On the question of timetabling, it is important to put the Bill on to the statute book and to implement it speedily. It took many years to implement parts of the Consumer Credit Act 1974, and implementation this time around must be much quicker so that we can deal with the serious concerns expressed by the hon. Gentleman. He gave a moving account of what it is like to live on a low income, struggling to cope and facing harsh interest charges. I also agree with much of what the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) said.

I thank the Minister for his kind words of welcome. He must be delighted to be dealing with the issue for a second time, and will have a sense of déjà vu. I congratulate him on making sure that the Bill has been introduced speedily in the House, as it is important that we make progress. I did not participate in debates on the original Bill, but in the last Parliament I was a member of the Treasury Committee, which conducted an inquiry on the credit card industry and practices that have caused genuine concern to pressure groups and the public. When the original Bill was introduced, the right hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Mr. McFall), the former Chairman of the Treasury Committee, said on Second Reading that it was scandalous that it had taken so long to introduce draft legislation in Parliament. The Minister is not to blame, because the delay occurred before he took up his portfolio.

It has taken far too long to introduce new legislation. The 1974 Act is more than 30 years old, and since its introduction there has been a revolution in the availability of credit and the range of credit products. As the hon. Member for Wealden pointed out, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of credit cards that are available. There was one in 1971, but more than 1,300 today. Borrowing on credit cards has gone through the roof. The legislation is therefore no longer fit for purpose. The new measure is long overdue and it is good that it is before Parliament today. Because the 1974 Act is no longer fit for purpose, consumers, including the most vulnerable, have been left unprotected, which is unacceptable. Today's press report that RBS NatWest has experienced an increase in arrears, following similar warnings by Barclays, HBOS and HSBC, is a timely reminder of what happens when interest rates go up. It is always the most vulnerable who are hit first. The market is not operating properly and that must change.

Before applying our minds to the legislation, we should state the principles that we will follow. The availability of credit is a good thing. We all need credit from time to time, and some people always need it. Different people need it to a different extent and for various periods of time. We must, however, avoid the paternalistic temptation to prevent people on low incomes from gaining access to credit, as they need it as much as the rest of us. We must ensure that lending is responsible so that those people do not get into difficulties.

Mr. Drew: I have made this point before, but I should like to reinforce it. We could provide genuine access to credit by ensuring that credit unions can be accessed through the postal network. Some hon. Members have tried to persuade local post office branches of that case, but there would be a dramatic improvement in lending practices if such access were available more widely. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Norman Lamb: Yes. The network is under enormous pressure and there are signs that it is dying, so it should be a priority to find new uses for it. I very much support the work of credit unions and it would be a very good thing to use the post office network in that way.

We need a competitive market, but that can be achieved only if consumers are informed, which depends on transparency and clarity of information, as well as the absence of misleading marketing and promotions. Indeed, the 2003 White Paper was entitled "Fair, Clear and Competitive". There must also be adequate protection for consumers and the means for them to seek redress. We all accept that personal responsibility is important, but the industry also has a duty to behave responsibly, particularly towards vulnerable consumers, including people on low incomes, people with mental health problems and young people. As the father of a 17-year-old son, I am acutely aware of the importance of responsible lending to young people.

The industry has had to face up to quite a challenge. It can be easy to tar everyone with the same brush, but I think that parts of the industry have behaved irresponsibly and unacceptably. That does not apply only to the backstreet lenders; there are names on the high street that have behaved improperly and got people into a lot of difficulty, leading to some tragic cases, including suicides. There is culpability among the high street names as well as the backstreet ones. The Select Committee on the Treasury should have some credit for initiating a debate on some of those unacceptable practices. During the inquiry, Barclays bank had to withdraw a promotion, under pressure from the Office of Fair Trading, because it was misleading.

There has been a response and progress has been made. The introduction of summary boxes giving clear information is one way in which the industry has responded. It has moved some way, although not far enough, in my view, towards providing clear information so that the consumer has the information that is necessary to make an informed judgment. Some of the worst excesses are therefore now in the past, but there is still a long way to go and key concerns remain. We need to consider how, if at all, the Bill addresses those concerns.

First, there has been a failure to achieve adequate data sharing, and reform is essential. We have not got there yet and I am not convinced that the Bill does anything effective to address the problem. I shall be interested to hear the Minister explain precisely how he envisages we can crack the problem. Difficulties arise when people go to a number of different lenders and borrow—they may well be making the minimum monthly payments—so that the total amount never shows up as a default, but cumulatively gather a debt that is completely unsustainable, after which everything crashes. It is incredible that that can continue.

Many financial institutions accept that data sharing must come and that it must be complete, but some institutions are still resisting it. On this issue, as on some others, the Minister could use the Bill and the threat of possible amendment to force the hand of some of the companies involved and persuade them to move further than they have done so far. I urge him to consider that. There has been a long debate about the problem of data sharing, and it is time for some action.

Which? has suggested a possible solution and I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments. It suggests that the credit agreement should contain the ability for the consumer to consent to the sharing of information, with some key caveats. First, there should be clarity about the information to which consent to disclosure applies. Secondly, the sharing of information should be limited to organisations recognised by the Information Commissioner as credit reference agencies. Thirdly, the data should be used only for assessing credit worthiness. This is not rocket science, but getting from the industry a voluntary commitment to introduce such a requirement in all agreements would go a long way towards sorting out the problem. I shall be interested to see whether Minister wishes to take the proposal forward. We can take action through either regulation or voluntary agreement. My preference is always for voluntary agreement, if it can be achieved.

The second specific concern that remains—I raised it in an intervention on the Minister—is the fact that although there is new regulation on the single method of calculating annual percentage rates, there are still about 10 different ways in which credit card companies calculate interest, depending on when the interest rate starts to run. The inevitable consequence is that a single APR achieves nothing in terms of greater transparency

[Norman Lamb]

if the consumer cannot make a proper comparison between one card and another. The industry resists any uniform approach to calculating interest, often on the grounds that it would cramp its style or restrict innovation and so on. I am not wholly convinced, but there is another way in which the problem of lack of clarity and the ability to compare one product with another can be dealt with: showing the cost of credit using a common scenario or illustration in respect of all credit cards. The information could be shown in pounds and pence so that the consumer can see the cost of credit in cash terms and not in percentage terms, which many of them do not understand.

I pursued that concept all the way through the Treasury Select Committee inquiry. Initially, there was no interest at all, but by the end of our inquiry, John Vickers from the Office of Fair Trading had indicated support, as well as a number of consumer organisations. A number of credit card companies have not only indicated support, but have been trialling the idea of illustrations in pounds and pence. If there were voluntary agreement across all credit card companies to have a single set of illustrations, the problem of having one single interest rate calculation could be overcome, as people could see the cost of borrowing on different credit cards. I know that the Minister has said that the Government are monitoring the issue and that the Association for Payment Clearing Services is trying to introduce some uniformity to illustrations. What can he do to push the industry in the right direction, so as to create genuine transparency in the cost of credit?

Other issues remain unresolved. The *Daily Mail* referred this morning to a problem that cannot be addressed by regulation, but to which the industry must face up. Staff are often incentivised to sell more credit and they get extra money for flogging more, whether or not that is appropriate. It is inappropriate, especially in respect of more vulnerable consumers.

On credit card cheques, I know that a new opt-out protection has been introduced by way of the banking code. I was told in a letter from one of the Minister's officials that the Government plan to consult on the commitment that the Minister gave, during consideration of the Bill before the general election, to introduce secondary legislation on transparency of terms and conditions regarding credit card cheques. What is the time scale? Is he planning to consult now or will he take many months to get around to it? There is a serious problem with consumers not understanding the consequences of using the cheques.

The next problem that remains is minimum repayments. There are new warnings and some credit card companies are now giving illustrations of the cost of making minimum repayments, but the dangers remain. If the repayments are set too low, the debt that the consumer faces continues to grow. That is another problem that the industry must pursue further.

Penalty charges have been the subject of inquiry first by the Office of Fair Trading and now by the Competition Commission, and we may get somewhere. When the right hon. Member for Leeds, West and others talk about the problem of high interest rates, however, we must remember that it is often penalty charges that get people into difficulties. Because I did not pay off my Halifax account in time, four cheques went through, each of one of which carried a £30 charge. Such charges may prove to be punitive for people who are struggling on low incomes and that matter must be addressed, perhaps through the banking code.

We have already discussed the problem of the order of payment on credit cards. Some consumers do not understand that they are paying off the 0 per cent. debt that they have carried over from another credit card rather than subsequent purchases, which are subject to a rate of interest.

The payment protection insurance sector is making super profits. Again, because staff are too often incentivised, protection insurance is sold to people who are unlikely to be able to use it, and it would be good if the industry were to respond to that point.

The Bill does not specifically deal with any of those issues. I always prefer to see voluntary action by the industry and the banking code is the ideal mechanism for achieving that. If the industry does not take adequate action, however, the threat of regulation may be necessary.

How does the Bill measure up to the principles that I set out earlier? The Minister has stated that it will not catch all the issues, and I accept that point. It is fair to point out what has already happened by way of statutory instrument. In October last year, new rules were introduced on advertising consumer credit, including the APR issue, and on the prominence of key information on the cost of credit. In terms of transparency, however, the single APR is useless if interest is calculated in several different ways. New rules on the disclosure of information before consumers sign an agreement have also been introduced by statutory instrument. Consumers have the right to take the agreement away and study it, which is a welcome reform. New, fairer rules on early settlement have also been introduced, and those steps are all positive.

Turning to consumer rights, the Bill does not include measures on capped or maximum interest rates. The "Debt on our doorstep" campaign and some hon. Members who are present in the Chamber today have argued for a cap on interest rates, but the evidence that I have seen from other jurisdictions across Europe and America suggests that it would not achieve its objective. If a measure does not protect the most vulnerable people, what is the point of introducing it? The evidence shows that a cap would not protect the most vulnerable consumers.

John Battle: Will the hon. Gentleman tell me to what evidence he is referring?

Norman Lamb: I am referring to a study commissioned by the DTI, to which the right hon. Gentleman may object. *[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the Minister says, "He does." It is interesting that *Which?*, Citizens Advice and the National Consumer Council, which have considerable experience—far more than me—in the field, do not support a cap on interest rates. We should take careful note of what those organisations say.

Other factors such as high charges, which I have mentioned, and the extension of credit beyond what is sustainable, can be as pernicious as high interest rates.

John Battle: I accept the importance of those factors. Interest rates are capped in Germany, France, Holland and 14 American states. Where is his evidence that those caps do not work? I am not sure whether his statement is true. *[Interruption.]*

Norman Lamb: From a sedentary position, the Minister says, "It is true." We must debate the matter further in Committee. I repeat the point that when a number of organisations that are centrally involved in the field oppose a cap, we must take careful note of their opinions.

Adam Price: Does the hon. Gentleman think that the Church of England and the Local Government Association, both of which support the idea, are completely wrong?

Norman Lamb: I disagree with those bodies on this particular point, but I take note of their opinions. I do not know whether hon. Members can adduce different evidence, but the worst cases in which people commit suicide or experience a crisis such as a mental breakdown involve people taking on 16 different credit cards and personal loans while the data sharing system fails to catch the fact that debt is accumulating. The interest rates involved in such cases are often far below those offered by doorstep lenders, yet the cumulative effect of all that debt, together with charges and the extension of credit limits, produces the greatest tragedies. If the right hon. Member for Leeds, West can point to competing evidence, I would be interested to hear about it.

John Battle: It costs £700 to borrow £1,000 from a doorstep lender, which is so far over the odds that it is immoral and should be capped. I agree that the high profile cases involve different borrowers. APRs of 39 per cent. and 49 per cent. have been mentioned as great scandals; I deal with people who pay more than 1,000 per cent. APR. We should get a grip on the situation and, at the very least, serve notice to companies that they will be fined if they charge such interest rates.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I would never support such interest rates, but the question is whether we should make them illegal. If people are pushed out of the market, DTI research suggests that they will drift into borrowing from criminals, who are self-evidently totally unregulated. We can continue this debate in Committee.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and apologise to the Minister for missing his speech, although I served in Committee on the previous Bill, so I have probably heard most of his arguments.

I do not usually try to help Liberal Democrat spokesmen, but I will do so on this occasion because we should not go down the road of capping interest rates. The Bill does not state what constitutes "unfairness". In section 138(2)(a) of the 1974 Act, one of the things that constituted "extortionate" was a comparison of interest rates prevailing at the time that an agreement is made. We are withdrawing the specification and qualification of what "extortionate" means and are leaping towards "unfairness", which is probably a better test, but the fact that we are not defining "unfairness" is the kernel of the argument. The answer is not capping interest rates, but detailing what "unfairness" means.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The unfairness test, perhaps combined with guidance, on which the right hon. Member for Leeds, West and I agree, might make the interest rates to which he has referred unlawful and challengeable under the new unfairness test. Again, I call on the Government to provide clearer guidance.

The unfair relationship provision repeals the old test of extortionate credit, under which only 10 successful prosecutions occurred. Although I accept that its influence goes beyond what might be suggested by having only 10 successful cases, it has clearly been inadequate in terms of providing protection, and most people accept that. It is right to raise concerns, as did the hon. Member for Wealden, about whether, without a further framework or guidance, it will be compatible with the human rights legislation. It is a vague test, inevitably, as there is a lack of a clear framework for applying it, and that, combined with the presumption that the relationship is deemed unfair until the contrary is proved, makes it potentially onerous.

Also in respect of the human rights provisions, there are concerns about the powers of licensing and the sanctions given to the OFT. Again, the powers are very wide and unfettered—for example, the power to impose requirements on licence-holders. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has expressed the concern that the

"entirely unfettered scope of this power"

may pose

"a significant risk of incompatibility"

with human rights legislation.

I suggest that the Bill should set out the clear regulatory objectives that the OFT should apply in exercising its discretion. Although that proposal was put to me by the Consumer Credit Association, it seems to me that clarity is entirely in the interests of consumers, as well as of the industry.

Subject to those concerns, I support the change in the test. It is right to be able to survey the whole relationship to determine fairness, considering all the relevant circumstances, including the terms of the agreement and, crucially, the conduct of the parties. An agreement that on the face of it can look entirely reasonable may, in fact, be entirely unreasonable if it has been forced on a consumer in entirely inappropriate circumstances.

With regard to the enforcement powers of the OFT, and subject to the concern that I have expressed about the human rights legislation, we support wider, more flexible powers below the nuclear option of licence withdrawal. I note that the maximum fine of £50,000 can be changed by way of statutory instrument. It is sensible to provide such flexibility.

We support measures to make it easier for consumers to pursue a complaint. The alternative dispute resolution scheme using the financial ombudsman

[Norman Lamb]

service is an appropriate reform. I take on board the concerns of the hon. Member for Wealden about the capacity of the financial ombudsman service to cope, but that could be addressed and resolved—it is not a reason for not doing it. The alternative dispute resolution route is clearly preferable to consumers simply being left to expensive court action, and is a significant advance in consumer protection.

The Bill seeks to improve the regulation of consumer credit businesses. It broadens the fitness test to assess the competence of the business to provide credit. That is a sensible reform, as is the introduction of indefinite licences, which should lift the burden on responsible lenders so that greater focus can be applied to rogue lenders.

There are several other reforms, including annual statements and arrears notices. Like the hon. Member for Wealden, I suspect that it may be inappropriate to require the lender to serve a notice when the situation is being managed perfectly well between it and the borrower—for example, where there is an agreement whereby although the consumer has failed to pay for a certain number of weeks, the level of debt will not be increased by rising interest rates.

In principle, however, the reforms are sensible. There will inevitably be a number of specific issues that we will debate fully in Committee, but the thrust of these reforms is good. The Bill, although overdue, is certainly worth supporting. I hope that it will lead to a change of culture in those parts of the industry where practices have been unacceptable. As I have tried to indicate, the industry still has a big responsibility to go further in all those areas that are not directly covered by the Bill. However, I guess that the objective of us all is to achieve a transparent and competitive market where businesses can be successful but the industry works in the interests of the consumer.

2.25 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): As we have heard this afternoon, it is an absolute tragedy that in modern-day society we continue to hear stories of people taking their own lives because of their debt problems. It is therefore warmly to be welcomed that we have this Bill back with us today. I suspect that other hon. Members who were here during the debate on the previous Bill, which received broad support across the House, will be equally relieved that it has returned after it fell on Dissolution. As this Bill is almost identical, I hope that there will be a reasonable degree of unanimity, although I already sense that there are still slight disagreements on some aspects of it.

No one in the Chamber can fail to remember the Meadows case in Liverpool; in fact, the Minister referred to it earlier, keeping in mind that an appeal will be held on Monday. What was the real problem in that case? Was it the fact that an original debt of £5,000 rose to £385,000, or the fact that it took all of 14 years to go through the whole court process? Whatever is the case, there is no doubt that the introduction of the compulsory alternative dispute resolution scheme will improve consumer rights and offer greater protection.

For too long, consumers have been exposed to extortionate rates of interest. In general, the vast majority of people who find themselves in a financial plight have more than one debt. Only a couple of weeks ago, I had the unfortunate experience of meeting a constituent who was struggling with debt that had arisen from a credit card. She was a woman in her early 50s trying to cope with two or three different financial problems at the same time, one of them being a mortgage repayment. She is tied into a mortgage endowment that will, she told me, terminate in four or five years' time, but there appears to be a significant shortfall in its maturity figure. She knows full well that she will have to cope with that fairly major problem in four or five years' time. However, the credit card debt was starting to get out of control. For several months, she had been making payments faithfully and had never defaulted, but only 20 per cent. of what she paid was diminishing the balance that she owed. Some 80 per cent. was therefore being paid back in interest. Under normal circumstances, people would think that credit cards were fairly sound and reasonable but we have heard about negative experiences today.

The lady was reaching breaking point and she said to me, "If I continue in this vein, I will be in my mid 80s before I get this repaid." She was struggling. Thankfully, I was able to encourage her to go to the bank and speak to people about the debt, and the good news is that she now sees some light at the end of the tunnel.

We are constantly advised to save for our retirement and prepare for our later years but consumers never appear to be advised about the concept of saving. Perhaps I came from a different stable several years ago. Today's consumer is vastly different from those of 20 or 30 years ago. There have always been people who could afford anything they wanted. There were also those who saved to buy a specific item or endeavoured to make a purchase in a short-term, interest-free period. However, nowadays, we never hear of people saving to purchase products for the home or anything that might be deemed a luxury item. Indeed, what is a luxury item today? We live in a different society and people no longer save.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) said that people were ashamed of debt. Although I believe that that is true of some people, it worries me when we hear of others who almost boast about it. There has been a change in attitude in 20 or 30 years. Debt used to be a stigma for most people. Nowadays, that applies to fewer people. That is apparent even in game shows. "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" captures my imagination from time to time. The bold Chris Tarrant asks contestants, "And how much would you like to win?" to which people explain their reasons for how much they want to win. Often, one of the reasons for wanting to win a specific amount is to pay off debt, including credit card debt. I therefore stress to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West that some people almost boast about it. We live in a different society nowadays.

John Battle: I was trying to make the point that people do not find it easy to talk about their financial arrangements. For the poorest, it is not only a question of shame. Most people will not discuss how they balance their budgets and on what they spend their money. Even those who boast about how much borrowing they have done might not spell out their whole budget. We need, perhaps as part of youngsters' education, to teach them

to think and talk more about how to balance budgets and manage income. We are all bad at being open about it, even to our partners.

Mr. Brown: My right hon. Friend is right. Something needs to be done through education, especially for our young people. The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, mentioned his 17-year-old son. I have two daughters who are slightly older and it makes me somewhat anxious to hear them talking about their credit cards. I avoid asking questions in case I do not get the answer that I want to hear. It is all about being careful.

Despite the Government's valiant efforts to make our society more inclusive, some people still find it difficult even to open a bank account. Their financial circumstances are such that the banks do not want to know. Sometimes, perhaps because of where they live, there is no credit union. I applaud colleagues' comments about the value of credit unions in many communities. Many people who fall into the category of being unable to join a credit union or have a bank account never seem to have much of a problem with securing debt. Contributions in the Chamber this afternoon make that abundantly clear. All too often, those people get into the hands of loan sharks or companies that have no conscience about a consumer's becoming seriously indebted.

In the past financial year, Dumfries and Galloway citizens advice services dealt with 905 clients with debts that totalled just over £11 million. In April alone, they dealt with 42 new clients with debts that totalled £401,430. They are currently dealing with 461 cases with debts that total just under £5.5 million. To some right hon. and hon. Members, those sums might seem very small in the grand scheme of things, but in reality, they are becoming increasingly worrying in an area that suffers badly from a low-wage economy. I want to put on record my thanks to Dumfries and Galloway citizens advice service and the local welfare rights staff who work so diligently to assist my constituents with their financial problems.

The Government's White Paper highlighted the fact that escalating consumer debt can be traced back to the lack of ongoing information on credit agreements being provided by lenders. This is of particular concern to consumers who fall into arrears, as they are often unaware of the consequent charges on their account, such as default costs for missed payments, compound interest being charged on the amount owed, or underpayment on the accumulation of their debt. These are specific problems. We have heard this afternoon about interest rates, but sometimes they are not the problem. Sometimes the problem is the default payments that have to be made, and many consumers tend to bury their heads in the sand in such circumstances.

Although the Consumer Credit Act 1974 places some duties on the lender to provide information, they apply only when the consumer makes a request for it. I am delighted that the new Bill will require the lender to provide annual statements at no cost to the borrower, and that those statements will have to provide specific information to help the borrower. The aim will be to ensure that the borrower is kept fully informed of the status of their account throughout the entire life of the agreement. I also welcome clause 6, which requires businesses to issue annual statements for all regulated fixed-sum credit agreements with a term of more than 12 months.

This debate has thrown up some important issues that have not been dealt with by the Bill. We have heard demands for interest rate capping, and the issue of unsolicited credit card cheques has also been raised. Changes relating to APR calculations were introduced in October 2004—I compliment my hon. Friend the Minister on the part that he played in their introduction—but there are still big questions to be answered on that issue.

Responsible lending is important, and we must be critical of those lenders who exploit consumers, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West said, we must also consider the issue of education, because responsible lending goes hand in hand with responsible borrowing. This is about the exploitation of the poor, but the whole issue of irresponsibility regrettably involves wider society as well, and if left unchecked it can attack communities and neighbourhoods of all different social backgrounds. I applaud the Minister for bringing this Bill back so quickly, and I echo the plea that we should not only place it on the statute book but ensure that it is implemented as soon as possible.

2.38 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. "Do well, doubt not" is advice that any maiden speaker in the Chamber should take to heart. It is also the motto of the borough of Tunbridge Wells, the major part of which I have the great honour to represent here. Tunbridge Wells is a strong community, and I feel fortunate to be able to represent it. My constituency comprises not only the historic spa town of Royal Tunbridge Wells. It includes Southborough and High Broom, which is even older, and was home to the first Jewish Member of the House. It also contains Paddock Wood, which started off as a small agricultural settlement and has grown into a lively town in its own right.

My constituency also contains some of the most beautiful villages in the whole of England, from Groombridge and Speldhurst in the west, right across to Lamberhurst and Goudhurst in the east. Those beautiful villages in the heart of the high weald countryside are the source of great pride to visitors and residents alike.

Next year is particularly auspicious for Tunbridge Wells, as it is the 400th anniversary of the discovery by Lord North of the Chalybeate spring, which marked the foundation of the town. Lord North's physician opined that the waters of Tunbridge Wells could cure "the colic, the melancholy and the vapours, that they could make the lean fat and the fat lean". For any politician, a place that can cure the melancholy, the colic and the vapours is surely a very good place to choose to live, and I am pleased to do so.

The quality of life in my constituency is among the best of Britain. One of the jewels in the crown of my constituency will be at the heart of those celebrations of our 400th anniversary—the Pantiles. For Members who do not know it, the Pantiles is the Georgian colonnade par excellence. It contains shops, restaurants, cafes and

[Greg Clark]

bars, all of them independently owned and run. In a context in which the high streets and town centres of Britain are accused of being clones of each other, the Pantiles and the High street in Tunbridge Wells are the stunning exception to that rule, and I invite Members to visit if they have not done so previously. I shall do everything that I can to promote such pieces of our national heritage, which is very important.

Our quality of life extends beyond the Pantiles, and is prized particularly in our residential communities and villages. That is not to say, however, that we do not have our problems. Because our quality of life is so high, my constituents are rightly concerned to keep it that way. The rise in antisocial behaviour, graffiti, vandalism and car crime troubles my constituents, and I have pledged to them to work hard with the local council and police to take a tough line for the good of all people in my constituency.

In many senses, the worst thing about Tunbridge Wells is leaving it. I say that because the roads in our area are abysmal. I will press Ministers to turn their attention to that, and particularly to the A21 and the much-needed bypass at Colts hill, which is a notorious accident blackspot. The *Kent Messenger* has been running a strong campaign to get that bypass funded. Those are crucial developments, and I hope to ask Ministers to support my campaign for such improvements.

Although the springs of Tunbridge Wells are famously efficacious, we do need first-class hospitals in my constituency. A new one is about to be built at Pembury, and my concern is that the poor state of the roads, and the glacial progress towards dualling the A21, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) knows, might impact on the opening time of that new hospital. I am particularly concerned about the decision to refer that upgrade to the South East England regional assembly. I hope that Ministers will reassure me that that does not presage a permanent delay in that project.

Many people make the mistake of assuming that Tunbridge Wells is uniformly and universally affluent. That is not the case. We have areas of deprivation in my constituency that are the equal of many other parts of the country that are more associated with deprivation. Our problem is that because our average level of income is so high, we often do not get the specialist help and support that we need, and I am concerned that my constituents who most need help lose out in that respect.

That is one of the reasons that I was keen to catch your eye today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I know from my experience during the election campaign of the impact of worrying levels of debt in my constituency. I remember distinctly canvassing in an area called Showfields in Tunbridge Wells, and as I knocked door to door, a debt collector followed me almost house for house. I do not know whose visit was the more unwelcome, although we were certainly keeping pace with each other. I am concerned that we should take care of our vulnerable communities, even those in a relatively affluent area such as Tunbridge Wells.

It is a great privilege, and also a pleasure, to pay tribute to one's predecessor in a maiden speech. I want to mention two very distinguished predecessors, Archie Norman and Lord Mayhew of Twysden.

I have known Archie Norman for some years as the most candid man I have met in politics. I first encountered Archie when I was appointed director of policy for the Conservative party. I sent him a piece of work for approval, and he sent back an e-mail consisting of three words: "Hopeless, start again". But I can take that advice from Archie Norman, because I know that he has a clear mind and rigorous judgment, and is someone who always speaks the truth. I hope that my party will have occasion to take his advice in the months and years to come, as I certainly hope to do personally.

Anyone who has worked with Archie will know that he is kind and generous, and enjoys a great deal of affection as well as respect. That respect is very palpable in my constituency. Canvassing in Tunbridge Wells makes it very clear that Archie—as he is universally known there—has a reputation for being a particularly effective constituency MP. The bypass that has just opened at Lamberhurst could well be named the Archie Norman memorial bypass, and the hospital at Pembury also has a great deal to do with his ministrations.

The other former Member of this House to whom I want to pay particular tribute is Lord Mayhew, perhaps better known to hon. Members as Sir Patrick Mayhew. Lord Mayhew still lives in my constituency, and continues his community service to this day. At every flower show I attend, it seems, Patrick Mayhew is presenting the prizes. When the Royal British Legion march, Patrick Mayhew will be leading the procession. If I go to a fundraiser for the excellent local hospice, I can be certain that Patrick Mayhew will be leading the charge. I am always absolutely delighted to see him. If when I turn up at such events—as I hope I will for many years to come—I am greeted with the same delight as that with which my constituents greet him, I shall consider myself to have done my job very well in this place.

Lord Mayhew also had a high reputation in this place, and will keep it, as the man responsible for beginning the process that led to relative, if sadly not absolute, peace in Northern Ireland. In so doing he conducted himself with great dignity, and occasioned great disruption to his life and that of his family as a result of the security threats that that entailed; but he took it with characteristic good grace and humour. I have heard it said that he once thanked his bodyguards most sincerely for being prepared to give up their lives to protect his. One of the guards who was pretty sanguine about his responsibilities responded immediately: "Oh no sir, we are here to get the one who gets you." I am very privileged to have Patrick Mayhew and his wife Jean as my constituents. They are loved and respected in Tunbridge Wells, and I know that that will continue for many years to come.

Three weeks ago in the Chamber, we heard an excellent response to the Queen's Speech from the hon. and learned Member for Redcar (Vera Baird). In that speech, she described her motivation for entering politics. She said, in particular, that she wanted to help children from the old steel town of South Bank in her constituency to take up the opportunities available to them. She was not to know at the time that sitting in the

Chamber for the first time was a product of South Bank. South Bank is the town where I went to comprehensive school, and where my father, like his father before him, was the local milkman. I am keen to associate myself with the sentiments that she expressed. It goes to show that a commitment to come into politics and help in the work to give opportunities to everyone in our society is not the preserve of one political party, but an ambition in the House generally, as I think our presence on both sides of it demonstrates. I am grateful to be in the same House as the hon. and learned Lady.

The key to improving the life chances of people in my constituency, in South Bank and indeed throughout the country is maintaining strong communities. Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding villages is a set of strong communities, and I am very grateful and honoured to be chosen to be their voice. Voluntary groups, in profusion throughout the constituency, are doing fantastic work, and parish councils are working tirelessly for the good of their villagers. Our local newspaper, the *Kent and Sussex Courier*, has been awarded this year the national community newspaper of the year award, reflecting its place at the heart of our community.

It is important that we build up the trust that we place in our local communities. On issues such as planning, we do not trust our local people enough. I want to use my time in this House to transfer some powers away from it—and, indeed, away from Ministers—and to local people in my constituency and others.

You will probably have discerned from my remarks, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I have fallen in love with Tunbridge Wells and its people. It is very easy to succumb to that. There is an old saying that "Travel broadens the mind", but whenever I do travel these days I have cause to call to mind the final line from that great film "Lawrence of Arabia": "On the whole, I wish I'd stayed in Tunbridge Wells."

2.51 pm

Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye) (Lab): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) on the competence of his maiden speech. He is of course very nearly my neighbour, joined as we are not at the hip but by the A21; he can be assured that I will join him in pursuing such issues. Given the competence of his performance today, no one in this place would say, "Hopeless—start again." He is to be greatly congratulated, as indeed is his predecessor, who worked so hard to improve the highways in that area.

The constituents of Tunbridge Wells will certainly be disgusted by some of the developments in consumer credit in recent years. I doubt whether the Wilson Government of the 1970s expected the Consumer Credit Act 1974 to be "fit for purpose" for more than 30 years. The truth is that it has not been so for some time, and there are perhaps two reasons why, the first of which is social attitudes to debt itself and expectations. In the intervening years, we have witnessed the creation of the "me, now" society, from which I fear we have not recovered. Such a society sets store by the acquisition of consumer goods that were once regarded as luxuries, but which many now regard as necessities.

However, I am also conscious of the real demands placed on families on low incomes, who feel the need to "keep up with the Joneses" by buying the latest designer trainers or the latest fad in football shirts, thanks to the pressure put on them by their children. I know that these things happen, because my children tell me that their own children sometimes place such demands on them. I say this not by way of criticism but in acknowledgement of the pressures that do exist, to which easy credit is often seen as the answer.

So this Bill is an important social tool to protect some of the most vulnerable in our society from exploitation by those who have the means to fulfil their desires. There can be few situations in which the parties to a bargain can be as unequal as in the provision of credit. Of course, for most, credit—such as borrowing on a mortgage or borrowing for a new car—is a perfectly reasonable way of acquiring an asset. Those who are economically literate, who surely include most Members, are capable of distinguishing between an offer through the post of two free flights to Europe—involving a loan at 30 per cent. APR—and the offer from a high street bank of a loan at 1 per cent. above the Bank rate. Many, however, do not possess such economic literacy, and I shall return to that issue in due course.

It is therefore my view that, although the Bill is important, it needs to be more precise about whom and how it is intended to help. Indeed, as was mentioned earlier, the concept in the Unfair Contract Terms Act 1977, whereby those who decide whether a contract is unfair take account of the relative bargaining positions of the parties, should be the starting point in determining unfair relationships. When someone with an income of £100,000 wants to buy a Mercedes, that is a matter for the market; but it is a different matter when someone with three children needs to buy some Christmas gifts. It is also a different matter because one will pay 6 per cent. and the other will pay 50 per cent. That must be wrong, too.

I should like the Bill to tackle the concern in at least two ways: first, as I say, by taking into account the respective bargaining positions of the parties when determining what is and what is not fair; and, secondly, by imposing an obligation on the lender not to lend where the repayments are unaffordable given the borrower's circumstances when the loan is made.

I am not suggesting that the lender should be responsible for subsequent difficulties that may arise, but it is my view that many lenders—this applies to the provision of store cards, in particular, and to certain doorstep operators—take no account whatsoever of the ability to pay. Indeed, it would be entirely possible, by regulation, to set a test for that ability—perhaps along the lines of requiring that a residue disposable income of, say, two thirds of the social security rate must be available for living after accounting for the maximum repayments under a contract, or something of that nature. In particular, such an arrangement should apply to store and credit cards, where vast credit limits are often set that, if used to their limits, can sometimes place debtors in an impossible situation.

The hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) mentioned that he was offered additional credit irrespective of his means. I was pleased to receive, although did not accept, an offer of significant additional credit earlier this year, just before the election, when my Tory opponents were telling me that

[Michael Jabez Foster]

I had no chance of future employment. They were wrong, but the credit card company could have been wrong, too. Such offers are, indeed, nonsense.

My solution would be that, where excessive credit is granted in such circumstances, the debt should not be recoverable. The system should be as pressured as that for the lender. In short, when recovering debt, the creditor should be able to show that an assessment was made of the debtor's ability to repay at the time of the granting of the credit.

For many of those of us who may be lawyers, the discussion of consumer credit is of academic interest; but, for some, it is an issue of life itself. I should like to tell the House a little about a debt survey that was carried out in my constituency just last year by Peter Ambrose and Liz Cunningham of the university of Brighton, which serves to show just why the Bill is necessary.

The study, entitled "The Ever Increasing Circle", was published in November last year and commissioned by a charity known as the Tomorrows People Trust, with the help of GOSE—the Government office for the south-east—Hastings borough council and the Greater Hollington Partnership. Those working for the Tomorrows People Trust had noted in their efforts to move the unemployed into employment that around 30 per cent. of people were reluctant even to try to do so because they said that they could not afford to go to work. So the survey was commissioned to look at groups in both Hastings and Brighton to discover whether that perception was well founded.

Sadly, the situation was even worse than those involved had believed. The survey showed that a staggering 38 per cent. of people found that debt was the main barrier to seeking employment. It was recognised that the welfare-to-work strategy in which the Government have created initiatives—such as the job grant, housing and council tax benefit run-on and adviser discretion grants—was helpful in assisting the long-term unemployed. Yet all that was not enough for many people to deal with and overcome debt as an impediment to seeking employment.

Of course, it was not only the barrier to work that was a problem when debt became unmanageable. Indeed, health—particularly mental health—family breakdown and exclusion from community activity were all part and parcel of the dilemma. However, for a significant minority—38 per cent.—debt was their major barrier.

The respondents were then asked why. Some said it was the amount of emotional energy, not just the cash, that the issue took that made it difficult for them to concentrate on finding work. They said things such as:

"I think it stops me looking for work—it's always on my mind, especially with all these court things. If I get a job, then they're going to take it out of my wages and things like that. I can't really afford for that to happen if I've got to pay housing and council tax and look after my son. It's quite scary."

Another woman said:

"It's a no win situation. If you get back into work then you fall into a less helped category and take on more responsibility and it's this big support thing of going back to work, sorting things out."

As people try to sort out their debts, the creditors come after them. Many others told similar stories of their concern that creditors hold back when there is nothing to touch but, once the debtor is in work, the creditors move in. The objective is surely to avoid, wherever possible, that downward spiral into despair. It is not simply the individual who loses out by this impossible credit obligation that they take on, but society too—be it through the NHS or the continuance of the unemployed.

Surely we are seeking to give particular protection to those in the lowest-income bracket. A social exclusion report of April 2004 provided further evidence of the differential impact of debt when it noted that those on incomes of less than £11,500 owed on average about 35 per cent. of their annual income in debt whereas for, higher income groups, only 10 to 20 per cent. of their income was committed. Indeed, all those on incomes of less than £7,500 had serious debt problems.

I mentioned earlier that it was my belief that many individuals fail to manage credit because of financial illiteracy. Many households are still incapable of managing a household budget. Many see the solution to managing their budgets by filling the gap in the short term by borrowing. We all, of course, know of the day of reckoning that will come, with the often tragic circumstances that arise. We cannot protect everyone from themselves. This is not a nanny state, and neither should it be. However, in a society that cares, we must ensure that people are not unfairly treated and that their relative bargaining position is recognised and, where possible, that we educate, perhaps even through the national curriculum, to ensure a degree of economic literacy.

I now wish to look briefly at some provisions of the new Bill and how they appear to improve on the earlier legislation. As has been said, the extortionate credit provisions of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 do not work as consumers are either unable or unwilling to challenge extortionate conduct by lenders or, in any event, lack the will or ability to do so. My hope is that the new provisions against unfair relationships as set out in clauses 19 to 22 will offer a solution. In particular, clause 19 inserts the new "unfair relationship test" but it is important that there is even clearer direction as to what an unfair relationship consists of.

I appreciate that the provisions of the Bill are to ensure that the court pays regard not only to the terms of the agreement, but to the way in which the creditor has exercised or enforced his rights and any other thing done or not done by the creditor. Indeed, it may additionally take into account any other matters, but the Bill still does not say precisely what I want it to say. I want it to say that the court shall specifically take into account the specific strengths of the parties at the time that the agreement was entered into. Nothing short of that, I fear, will protect the vulnerable.

Although I notice that the Opposition did not, I particularly welcome the burden that is intended to be placed on the creditor to prove that the credit relationship is fair rather than on the debtor needing to prove that it is unfair. In that respect, it is important that the creditor has taken account of the debtor's ability to pay or repay the debt at the time of the making of the agreement. Indeed, I still think that there is a need for a cap on interest rates perhaps by some formula linked to

the Bank of England lending rate. After all, the money lenders Act provided that a rate in excess of 48 per cent. was prima facie excessive. I would not have thought that it would be difficult to create some sort of framework to set out a rate of interest that would normally be considered excessive—say, 10 times the Bank of England lending rate—to give the court guidance, yet still leave it discretion.

I want to highlight the fact that poor people are in the main those who suffer from the current credit market. It is thus they who need the support, so surely their individual circumstances must be taken into account. The study by the university of Brighton to which I referred also queried why poor people were prepared to deal with companies such as the Provident that charge rates of perhaps 40 or 50 per cent., or even more. It found that the answer was twofold. First, it found that other credit lines were not available. Most people found the social fund almost impossible to access. As we all know, the vast majority of people who apply to the social fund are turned down. Additionally, people in many parts of the country failed, or were unable, to contact credit unions, which would often be the answer. The second reason found by the study was simple. It found that the relationship between clients and collectors from groups such as the Provident operated on first-name terms with frequent contact, so the collectors were trusted.

If we are to avoid poor people falling into such pitfalls, we need to give greater help to groups such as credit unions, which are already making a difference in a small way. Certainly the Hastings credit union is making a difference and I congratulate it on its work. Incidentally, I understand that the rates of interest that credit unions can charge are limited, which is an argument for issuing guidance on the matter.

I pay tribute to the sterling work of debt advice services, such as that run by the Hastings citizens advice bureau. They really are life-savers, and I hope that through the Bill we can lighten their load.

3.7 pm

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) on making what I am sure you will agree, was a distinguished and passionate speech in the best traditions of the House.

It is a great honour to have been elected by the people of Basingstoke to be their Member of Parliament. Basingstoke is a great place to live and we are very proud of it. I pay special tribute to my predecessor, Andrew Hunter, who served the Basingstoke constituency for 22 years. He was known in the House as a passionate man of strong principles and Basingstoke knew him as someone who worked tirelessly for the many hundreds of constituents who came to him for help and support. Time after time during the election campaign I met people who told me that Andrew would be a tough act to follow and I am sure that they were right. Throughout the past two years, Andrew has extended to me enormous support and guidance, for which I will always be grateful. As a result of that help, I hope that I am better placed to attempt to meet the high standards that he set.

I am truly fortunate to have been elected to represent a constituency that I believe exemplifies all that is great about Britain. It is a cocktail of the historic and the modern; the rural and the urban. It is one of the largest centres of employment in the south-east of England and is set in the most beautiful rolling Hampshire countryside. I believe that Basingstoke is a success because it has a unique balance between those different elements, so it is vital for us to protect that balance.

The constituency itself comprises the town of Basingstoke and its many surrounding villages, including Pamber, Sherfield-on-Loddon, Bramley and Silchester, and the communities of the idyllic Candover valley, all of which are home to numerous businesses, farms and estates, as well as to residents working in Basingstoke and further afield. The origins of our community, like so many, date back to Roman times. Silchester, a beautiful village just north of Basingstoke, was once a vibrant and thriving Roman settlement. The area around it is an archaeological treasure trove. The walls of the old Roman town still stand and give visitors an idea of the scale of this once pivotal Roman settlement. History does not tell us why, after prospering for so many years, the original Silchester settlement was abandoned. Today's Silchester may be a smaller affair, but the residents typify north Hampshire people in the pride that they take in nurturing their community.

Basingstoke also had an important role in the civil war. The siege and ultimate storming of Basing house is an important part of our nation's history and of this place. Basing house, home of the royalist Marquis of Winchester, was the largest fortified house in England. It is said that when the house was finally stormed by Cromwell in October 1645, King Charles realised that his cause had finally been lost.

In common with many buildings visited by Cromwell during the civil war, Basing house is now in complete ruins, but the site is carefully protected by Hampshire county council and Basingstoke's archaeological and historical societies. It also provides a fine venue for many local events throughout the year, some of which I have had the pleasure of attending with my husband and three children.

Basingstoke has been for centuries a market town. Indeed, the market recently celebrated its 790th anniversary. This event was duly commemorated and celebrated by Basingstoke's heritage society. All those historical facts serve as a reminder that the face of the modern constituency of Basingstoke belies a proud history. That continuity through history can also be found in some of the Basingstoke's past representatives in the House. Immediately prior to the civil war, Members for Hampshire included Sir Henry Wallop and Sir Richard and Sir Thomas Jervoise. I am pleased to say that they were all on the parliamentary side. Their descendants still live in the constituency and make a significant contribution to our local community.

I had great pleasure in working with another of my predecessors during the general election campaign—Sir David Mitchell, father of my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell). Sir David was first elected as Basingstoke's Member of Parliament in 1964, the year I was born—something I find more amusing than Sir David does. On a superficial level, there are many differences between Sir David, Andrew Hunter

[Mrs. Maria Miller]

and myself. I may be Basingstoke's first female Member of Parliament and the first to be educated at a comprehensive school, but in truth there is great continuity in our shared Conservative beliefs and our passion for Basingstoke's continued success.

The modern face of Basingstoke boasts excellent facilities and amenities. We are fortunate to be served by the North Hampshire hospital, located in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young). It is a world leader in treating bowel and liver cancer. We are home to the Anvil, one of the finest modern concert halls in the country. More recently, the town has seen the arrival of Festival Place, a state-of-the-art shopping development. But Basingstoke is not—or not yet—utopia. The delicate balance of Basingstoke's character and uniqueness, which has proved so attractive to families and businesses alike, is under threat.

Basingstoke has taken its responsibility to provide new housing very seriously over the past 40 years. In more recent years, the Government's appetite to build houses in Basingstoke has increased significantly, but the funding for necessary local services has not. When we look at the services that support those new homes, we see that they have simply not kept pace. Our trains are overcrowded, our doctors' surgeries are bursting at the seams, and our police struggle to deal with antisocial behaviour because they do not have the strength and numbers to provide more visible policing. Housing development plans have mushroomed, sometimes with questionable benefits for those seeking more affordable housing. These are all problems that were of enormous importance during my election campaign and will be important priorities for me in my work in this place.

We need to support and protect our towns from becoming characterless urban sprawls, where the distinct nature of each community is blurred and lost. Basingstoke will retain its identity if we maintain its unique character, which I believe is best understood by those who have the interests of Basingstoke at heart and those who are locally accountable to the Basingstoke electorate.

Retaining our strength is important not only for people locally but for the country as a whole. Basingstoke has a worldwide reputation for business, and our companies employ more than 80,000 people in many diverse fields. Our success owes much to classic industrial location theory; we have a skilled work force, good transport links and good proximity to London and the European markets. The town boasts offices of some of the world's leading companies. It will be of great importance to me in my work here to ensure that Basingstoke is able to continue to compete in the global market.

Places such as Basingstoke are the nation's economic powerhouses, generating the tax that makes so many of our present Government's plans possible. Basingstoke needs a Government who understand how to provide the right environment for future success, giving an opportunity to succeed and build on the wealth of the nation. If business in this country is overtaxed or overburdened with regulation, it can, and will, choose to locate elsewhere. As a graduate, like others on the Opposition Benches today, of the London School of Economics, I appreciate that there is nothing inevitable about Basingstoke's continued economic prosperity and, unlike the residents of Silchester all those years ago, we should take nothing for granted.

It should come as no surprise that Basingstoke has participated fully in the explosion of consumer debt that has taken place throughout the country in recent years. The world has changed enormously since 1974, when the existing Consumer Credit Act was passed. I recall being taken by my father in the mid-1970s to a local building society to open a savings account, on the basis that if one did not have a record of savings then, one simply could not get a mortgage in the future. How times have changed.

The vast majority of lenders treat customers fairly. A small proportion do not, with devastating consequences. I know from talking to those at my local citizens advice bureau, the people who often have to deal with the consequences of the current legislation, that they face unprecedented demand for debt advice counselling. They gave me an interesting example of a client who came to them 12 months ago. She had a borrowed a small amount, £400, by way of an e-loan. She had gone on the web to a virtual broker and been charged £30 for doing an online search for the best deal. The best deal that the broker came up with was a loan with interest payable at 300 per cent. APR. In fact, the agreement that the client signed, online, included a monthly repayment figure that serviced the interest only and not one penny of the capital. That meant that the borrower would simply never repay the loan. The full terms and conditions of the loan came to light only when she contacted the lender for a settlement figure to be told that she had not even started to pay off the debt. The Bill is designed to avoid that type of situation being allowed to happen in future. I hope that it will help to ensure that consumers are better informed when entering into any credit agreement and that it will help to promote a more transparent market based on responsible lending.

As a Conservative, my guiding principles are based on opportunity and freedom, and nowhere more than in business. I abhor unnecessary regulation, and I dare say that there are elements of the Bill that may prove unnecessary. However, I believe that this is one of those areas where regulation is required to protect consumers in the unequal battle with lenders and other creditors.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak today. I would like to thank the people of Basingstoke for giving me this opportunity to serve them.

3.18 pm

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): Before I address some remarks to the Bill I would like to compliment the two Conservative Members who have made maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) gave an incredibly competent and self-assured maiden speech. I was particularly interested, in so far as we have one thing in common: I come from a spa town, Cheltenham. I was interested that he brought out the point that even within towns that are popularly considered to be affluent there are invariably pockets of poverty that must be addressed. The fact that they are in towns of affluence often makes it more difficult to do so. The quality of his contribution demonstrated the fact that he will be most effective in addressing those problems.

The hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) gave a fascinating history of Hampshire. The research that she did and the fact that she has obviously engaged with so many constituents' problems already clearly demonstrate that she will prove to be a most effective representative for her constituency in this House. I wish both hon. Members well.

Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on bringing the Bill before the House again. Like many others, I was very disappointed that it did not reach the statute book in the previous Parliament, and given the problems that it addresses, I was particularly concerned in case it was not reintroduced early in this Parliament. My hon. Friend has insisted on that and made sure of it, and I congratulate him.

I see this Bill as an essential part of an anti-poverty strategy. It will not in itself deal with all aspects of poverty, but it undoubtedly addresses a particular contributor to poverty in this country that must be addressed, and it complements a range of other policies. I instinctively prefer a lighter-touch approach to manufacturing and in some cases to the financial industry, but given the debate on a number of issues in the Bill, particularly capped interest rates, industry must be made aware that this is a wake-up call and that the Government maintain a reserve power to take action if the proposals embodied in this legislation do not deal with the problems that have been so effectively articulated by a range of speakers to date.

A number of Members have pointed out the changes that have taken place since the enactment of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. That made me think back to that year. I remember it particularly well, because it was the year when I first applied for a mortgage. I cannot help but contrast my experience then with that of people now. I remember, having saved in a local financial institution for some years, asking about the possibility of a mortgage. I had to sit down and go through all the details of my income and expenditure, and wait with some trepidation while the manager of the local branch looked through them dubiously before, with certain admonishments about the pattern of my future expenditure, grudgingly agreeing to give me a small mortgage.

Now, that same financial institution is one of many bombarding me with offers of loans and mortgages that I do not want. If I had been told that then, I would truly have believed that the revolution had come. In many ways, of course, a revolution has taken place: the financial deregulation in the 1980s. It has led to a transformation in the financial world. We have a huge increase in lenders. That has led to more competition, and in many ways that is welcome. We have more sophisticated marketing, which has both its upside and its downside. This is meant for those people who are financially sound with good jobs and for those who are financially well educated. It has been a liberating experience for them. New opportunities have been offered to people in those categories. That has had a vital role in improving the lifestyle of many people, and I would not wish to decry or belittle that.

There are other groups such as the unemployed, those on low incomes, single parents and some elderly people on low fixed incomes who have had an entirely different experience as a result of market deregulation. On one hand, they are bombarded with images of instant consumer gratification that can come with the flick of a credit card. On the other, they are confronted with the reality of having a low income, a low credit rating and high risk. When obtaining credit, they face high interest rates or, in addition, hidden charges. They are more at risk than others, and so many of the mainstream credit providers do not have the products that will suit these people. For a variety of reasons, people in some of the poorest areas on the lowest incomes are not able to have access to a range of products that are offered by the mainstream financial providers, because they have either withdrawn from those areas or because they are just not available to them.

There is a vacuum, which is met by doorstep salesmen who peddle loans with high interest rates. Such arrangements are often disguised by complex regulations and promoted, sometimes, by simplistic and seductive marketing techniques. All too often these arrangements send people who are already on low incomes down a spiral of higher debt charges and greater poverty. For someone on a very low income, it takes only what we would consider a relatively small financial problem to place them on the slippery slope.

A woman came to my constituency surgery in tears. She lived in privately rented accommodation and her central heating system had packed up. Her landlord would not repair it. Instead, he gave her two convector heaters as a substitute. These heaters were eating up electricity. As a result, her fuel bills were rising. She ran into debt. She went to debt companies and there was a high interest rate. The process escalated until she was in a state of desperation. That is just one example, but I know that it is mirrored by those of hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country who live in communities like the one that I represent.

A high proportion of people who live in constituencies such as mine have no bank accounts. Research was undertaken by Salford university in a Sandwell ward—the local authority—on behalf of the Sandwell credit union. Its findings showed that 33 per cent. of residents had no savings accounts, that 20 per cent. had no bank accounts and that 29 per cent. had debt problems. I know that these figures are reflected in other wards. All too often it is the small items—the need to have a washing machine, to provide school uniforms for the children and tragically, in some instances, the need for the elderly to pay for a funeral—that cause problems. An example from the local CAB is of someone borrowing £1,000 for a funeral to bury a relative and having to pay £600 in interest. My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Michael Jabez Foster) mentioned credit unions, as did a number of other Members. Credit unions play a valuable role in filling a gap in the market, and I am grateful for the efforts of Sandwell credit union to meet such demands. I wish it well.

I should like to emphasise the fact that the financial services industry as a whole should give all the backing it can to credit unions, as there have been institutional obstacles to their development. I also emphasise the need for everyone, irrespective of their credit status, to play a role within credit unions; otherwise there is a danger that credit unions will be regarded as the poor man's bank. Many poor people do not want to be associated with a poor man's bank. Perversely, they feel

[Mr. Adrian Bailey]

more confident dealing with slicker financial institutions that do not offer the same sort of service. The work of credit unions should therefore be promoted.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): That is a fair point. We must encourage people to put money into credit unions. People often use credit unions to borrow money which, in a small number of cases, has led to credit unions getting into difficulties.

Mr. Bailey: I could not agree more. I shall certainly join the credit union that has just started up in my local area to demonstrate that people need to save and that it is a worthwhile savings institution. It can play a vital role in combating poverty as well as providing loans for people who are not in poverty.

Like other hon. Members, I wish to pay tribute to the role of my local citizens advice bureau, which dealt with £18 million worth of debt problems in 2004. It is at the forefront of efforts to tackle the issue, and its work in alleviating problems experienced by people locally is to be applauded. The experience it has gained in undertaking that work provides MPs and ultimately the Government with invaluable evidence on the ground of the way in which our policies are working and the need to amend legislation to prevent problems from arising.

Various issues that need to be addressed by the Bill have been mentioned by hon. Members, and I shall highlight one or two. Aggressive marketing and responsible lending are important issues. When my stepson was 18, he returned with a group of people from a Club 18–30 holiday in Ibiza to the local airport in the early hours of the morning. The group was met by credit card salesmen, if they can be called that, promoting credit cards to young people who do not have any experience of financial management and are somewhat high from their holiday experience. They need money, and are easy prey for people deploying unscrupulous techniques. Happily, or perhaps unhappily, my stepson came home and we made sure that the credit card was soon dealt with. I am concerned, however, that if young people do not have parents skilled in financial management, they could be sucked into a spiral of debt at an early age without sufficient earnings or the ability to cope with the problem.

The issue of credit cheques has been well argued by other hon. Members, so I shall not labour it, but I emphasise the point about responsible lending. Let me quote evidence from Centrepoint, the charity dealing with the homeless, which says that 20 per cent. of its residents—many of these people do not have a job, and they do not even have homes—have been targeted by credit card companies. There must be means in the legislation to place an obligation on the companies involved to target their marketing more responsibly. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) that the concept of a responsible lending test needs to be embodied somewhere in the Bill.

Other issues that need to be addressed include payment protection insurance. All too often, insurance is sold to people who cannot benefit from it. The worst example that I have seen involved a couple with £77,000 of debt who took out £44,000 worth of insurance. They had mental health problems and would never have qualified to receive any payments in the first place.

Debt management companies are another group that needs to be subject to some sort of regulation and testing. Often, people who have gone to the citizens advice bureau for support in dealing with their financial problems have already been to debt management companies. In some cases, the advice and actions of such companies have compounded the debt problems of those individuals. The legislation must contain provisions to deal with that issue.

Mark Tami: My hon. Friend has been very generous in giving way. Does he agree that problems can arise not only when the debt management companies address existing debts? We see in television advertisements how such companies often encourage people to take on another lump of debt, perhaps because they are making lower payments over a much longer period, to go on holiday or buy some other goods. That can mean that the problem simply becomes worse.

Mr. Bailey: As always, my hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Again, the issue must be dealt with through the responsible lending approach that must be incorporated in the legislation.

On the alternative disputes resolution procedure, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West made some valuable and important points about people's engagement with the legal process. We must be clear that the most vulnerable are often those who either instinctively do not want to go through a court procedure or are not skilled in grievance and complaints procedures. In some cases, people simply would not know how to do so. There is a danger that, unless consumers know very early on that there is a clear and free system of redress that can be used if they feel that they are being unfairly treated, we could lose the benefit of the Bill. Many such people would not think of taking action against the very companies that exploit them, as they would feel under-confident, and under-equipped and under-qualified to do so. I emphasise to the Minister that means of redress must be made clear, easy to use and free.

The Bill can play an important role in reducing the sum total of misery caused by poverty and the cost incurred by the general community. We are discussing the impact of debt not only on individuals, but on the health service—many people take up GPs' valuable time with stress-related problems, which are often associated with poverty and, in some specific cases, with debt. We have heard examples of debt leading to suicide, and such cases impact on both the community and services at large. I welcome the Bill, which will benefit the whole community as well as the individuals concerned.

A number of improvements could be made in other areas to compliment the Bill. The Minister is not responsible for all those areas, but I must mention the reform of the social fund, which would stop so many people having to take out small but potentially expensive loans, and the need for efficient benefit administration, because inefficient administration often forces people to take out loans. In combination with other reforms in our welfare support system, the Bill will make a meaningful contribution to reducing poverty and the problems that arise from it in our community.

3.41 pm

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): I am pleased to have the chance briefly to contribute to the debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) on his excellent maiden speech. He has already made a distinguished contribution to the Conservative party as director of policy—some might say that a little more work remains to be done given the evidence of the past few weeks—and I read many of the research department's products when he was in charge. I am sure that we will hear more from him.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) on her maiden speech. Not only were we at university together, to which she alluded, but I shared a flat with her husband, and her daughter, Georgia Charlotte Mary Miller, is my goddaughter. I am biased in her favour and congratulate her on having arrived here. She may be charming, but she has inner steel and determination—she has not only run a successful and happy family with three children over the past 15 to 20 years, but had an outstanding business career. I am sure that she will make a wonderful contribution to this House.

I have listened to the debate with interest and particularly enjoyed the contribution by the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle)—I hope that the Minister was listening carefully, and I think that he was. If we want to restore people's faith in the House of Commons, we could do no more than play the tape of the right hon. Gentleman's speech, which was passionate, highly informed and persuasive. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to the right hon. Gentleman in Committee.

I want to deal with a couple of issues that have already been alluded to, the first of which is the question whether the definition of "unfairness" should be tighter. On the face of it, I agree with the Minister that the definition should not be too precise. Clause 19, which deals with unfair relationships between creditors and debtors, appears to give the court everything that it could possibly want:

"The court may make an order . . . if it determines that the relationship between the creditor and the debtor arising out of the agreement . . . is unfair to the debtor because of . . . any of the terms of the agreement or of any related agreement; the way in which the creditor has exercised or enforced any of his rights under the agreement or any related agreement"

or, and one could not ask for a greater carte blanche than this,

"any other thing done (or not done) by, or on behalf of, the creditor (either before or after the making of the agreement or any related agreement)."

At least on the face of it, that would seem to provide the court with everything that it needs, but my concern, to echo the right hon. Member for Leeds, West, is about cases that do not arrive in court. We are not talking about equal parties here.

That also relates to the point about retrospection. Generally speaking, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) would agree, we would be hesitant about retrospective legislation because one of the key principles of the law is not only equality before the law, but certainty. One might think that a clause that states that

"A determination may be made under this section in relation to a relationship notwithstanding that the relationship may have ended"

would be deeply damaging to any sense of certainty between two parties entering into an agreement. Instinctively, I would be much less worried about retrospective legislation in this context than in some others, because it does not deal with parties who are equal in any way whatsoever, but with people who are often at the very bottom end of the income scale—people who live in grinding poverty with the greatest difficulty in getting by, as we have heard, not just from week to week but from day to day, and who live in fear with debt collectors already knocking on their doors. That must be recognised in the Bill so that the courts will understand that Parliament enacted it in order to stand up for the little people, not the big people.

My experience as a constituency MP suggests to me that the problem exists not only at the bottom end of the scale but in the middle, where respectable, or so-called respectable, financial institutions deal with people who have modest incomes but some savings. In such cases, the scales are weighted too much in favour of the financial institution. I have often dealt with the financial services ombudsman—I am sure that other Members have had similar experiences—and sometimes think, "Whose side are you on?" The idea is supposedly to help the little person, not the big institution. I was involved in a case involving Abbey National that has still not been resolved satisfactorily. On 4 April, I had an Adjournment debate in this House on a case of cheque fraud on which the Financial Services Authority has failed to act in the 18 months since the loophole was exposed. Anybody could still do today what was done to many constituents of mine who lost hundreds of thousands of pounds. The regulatory environment is often far from fair in paying sufficient heed to the needs of consumers.

Of course we want equality and certainty before the law, but we also want justice. There has been a general recognition, in successive Governments' approach to regulation, that wholesale credit markets or wholesale credit derivative markets, for example, require a very light touch because one is dealing with adult parties to a transaction who do not want or expect the Government to interfere very much. At the other end, there is a much greater degree of interference; that is why I was attracted to the suggestion of a reserve power. I should like there to be powers that are potentially draconian but exercised with the discretion and judgment of Solomon, although I know that is not always an easy balance to strike. More needs to be done for the consumer and for the little person, not for the big institutions, which already have too many other cards stacked in their favour.

3.48 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend, East) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this great opportunity to speak in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) on a very passionate speech—indeed, she used the word, "passion". I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark). Those Members who were listening carefully will recall that he mentioned his love life—he said, "I have fallen in love with Tunbridge Wells." If I may be bold and slightly controversial in suggesting an affair, I ask him to find room in his heart to come and speak in Southend, a town with which I am sure he will also fall in love.

[James Duddridge]

I follow in the footsteps of Sir Teddy Taylor. Teddy and his wife Sheila welcomed Katy and me to the area with open arms and have always been there offering a helping hand. Our friendship is no doubt assisted somewhat by the fact that we share a passion for protecting the sovereignty of this Parliament and the United Kingdom from all who attack it.

Teddy served the constituencies of Southend, East and what is now called Rochford and Southend, East for some 25 years. Before that, he was the Member of Parliament for Glasgow, Cathcart. In total, he was a Member of Parliament for 40 years, having first been elected in 1964. He has the respect of everyone in the constituency, from every walk of life and political party. He also served the country in the Scottish Office and subsequently as shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. He was and will continue to be a force in British politics and a great character. As I said, Teddy was first elected in 1964, before my parents had even met, let alone when I was a twinkle in their eye. I shall not try to replace Teddy, either in the Chamber or in the constituency. Apart from anything else, I cannot do the accent.

I trust that the House will indulge me while I give an overview of the constituency. Rochford, to the north, is a long-standing market town, which has excellent architecture and is rich in history. It lies in Rochford district and Essex county council. Rochford district also boasts the lovely villages of Great Wakering, Little Wakering and Barling. Foulness Island, at the most easterly point of the constituency, was home to the Ministry of Defence and now accommodates QinetiQ, which tests munitions for our armed forces. The island represents half the constituency in size but contains only 179 voters.

By contrast, Southend-on-Sea is much more densely populated. Our home is only a few minutes from the water, with wonderful views across to Kent and out to the ocean. We have a pier—the longest pleasure pier in the world. We also have award-winning beaches. It is a truly wonderful place. On a warm summer night, with the tide in, there are few better places to be than on the front, enjoying the sand, the sea and a plethora of other activities. With new, larger hotels being built in the area, it will doubtless be an excellent place for political conferences, especially for the smaller parties.

Southend is not all sea and fun—we have a serious side. We have a vibrant education sector, with excellent grammar schools throughout the constituency and throughout Southend. In addition, the university of Essex, where I did my degree, has an expanding and welcome presence in Southend.

The constituency also has its challenges. I especially want to mention two broad challenges. The first involves infrastructure and the second funding for our services. There is a problem with congestion for traffic heading from east to west and west to east. I would support work to widen the A127 and any measures to speed up traffic along that road. I would also welcome an outer relief road, although I am cautious about supporting specific proposals. Any outer relief road cannot be at the expense of building on the space for residential use. Rochford and Southend have unique charms and I would not want the areas to merge into one. Alas, once relief roads are built, the land within them becomes indefensible.

I want to refer to the funding of local services. Like many seaside towns, Southend has a different set of priorities compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. The seaside brings people into the area in their later years, which puts a particular strain on the health service budget. Lower cost accommodation means that authorities near London send asylum seekers to be accommodated in the area, although the local council gets no additional funding for the secondary costs of those populations. I look forward to working with colleagues in all parties to ensure that the unique problems of seaside towns are tackled as sympathetically as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) recently raised the problem of funding for Southend council with the Local Government Minister in an Adjournment debate. There are several causes of the funding crisis, but I want to highlight the main one, which was raised in the debate and is a matter of constant dispute in Southend. The dispute centres on the assertion by the Office for National Statistics that there has been a massive reduction in Southend's population.

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): Ridiculous!

James Duddridge: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is entirely right. To be frank, people in Southend laugh at that suggestion. Southend has new build and infill building, alongside the many houses that have been converted into flats.

There are arguably too many people coming to Southend because it is such a great place. The lack of recognition of the real population figure has lead to lower funding based on an artificially low population figure. I was extremely impressed by the Minister's attitude to this largely non-party political matter. It is clear that when there is a genuine problem, that Minister in particular is ready to listen, and I believe that he will be ready to act if the case is proven. I am looking forward to the more detailed discussions on the matter that are planned for the next few weeks.

I would hate to let my maiden speech descend into a shopping list for funding, but there is also a real problem with the cliff slipping into the sea. This is not an aesthetic problem; it could threaten large numbers of houses, as well as our main commercial and tourist centres. The cost of resolving this problem is some £40 million, although we have been unable to find the appropriate funding. While money seems to be available for high profile capital projects across the country, there appears to be insufficient money either for large scale repair works or to support revenue expenditure.

I come now to the Consumer Credit Bill. I welcome the Bill from the broad consumer protection perspective, but I wish to raise two points of concern, both of which have already been mentioned today. My first is the excessive burden being placed on the financial services industry. My second, which has been raised by many hon. Members, especially when the Bill was last in Committee, is the lack of definition of an unfair relationship between a creditor and a debtor, which has caused all kinds of problems and will continue to do so unless we do something about it in Committee.

I have seen at first hand the effects of regulation on the financial services industry, both in the UK and overseas. I spent 10 years of my life working for a British bank. I also worked in the unit trust industry at the time of the abolition of personal equity plans and tax exempt special savings accounts and the introduction of individual savings accounts. I was also responsible for regulatory changes in another country. In both cases, the legislative changes and the projects that followed prevented us from concentrating on our customers' needs, which is fundamental, and from providing value for shareholders, which is in the long-term interest.

It was with that in mind that I read the full regulatory impact assessment referred to in the explanatory notes to the Bill. No one can criticise the document for its lack of detail, but I found that it fell well short of the mark in business reality. Furthermore, I was concerned, when speaking to some in the industry, about the speed at which the consultation was done. Numbers have been placed on the regulatory costs, but I do not believe that those figures are a fair reflection.

My second point involves an example of where the costs of the regulation cannot be accounted for because the regulation itself is unclear. I am referring to the impact of the lack of a clear definition in the unfair relationships test. I trust that the House will forgive my bluntness, but it appears to me that the definition has been fudged. The buck has been passed to the courts, and in my view that is very dangerous. The Bill adds the following to the definition of something that is unfair:

"any other thing done (or not done) by, or on behalf of, the creditor (either before or after the making of the agreement or any related agreement)."

It strikes me that that could cover just about anything.

The right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) spoke, in his very thoughtful speech, about whether we should go for openness or narrowness. I would go for narrowness, but the difference between openness and narrowness is not the point. The point is clarity of definition, and I do not believe that that should be for the courts to decide.

If we leave it to the court, that is particularly invidious given that the Bill states that that test will be retrospective. It seems wrong to me, as a new Member of Parliament, that new legislation will cover old contractual relationships. Certainly, the problems of retrospective legislation will increase the cost of syndicated loans. Purchasers of a syndicated loan book will not know whether they are purchasing an unfair loan book, which has a number of implications: it would increase legal costs, reduce the value of the loan book, and ultimately and perhaps most importantly, make the cost of lending to the average consumer higher, which is not an intended consequence of this legislation.

Finally, in my maiden speech, may I say that it is a privilege and an honour to serve in this great House?

4 pm

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): May I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) and for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge) for their beautifully delivered pacans to their respective constituencies, parts of England of which, I must admit, I was hitherto deficiently knowledgeable. My only regret is that I am unlikely to get an invitation to address a branch meeting of my party in those areas, although I will take up the kind offer of the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East of possibly hosting Plaid Cymru's annual conference—I am not sure what the steering committee will say, but hope springs eternal.

Most of us would agree that the Bill is long overdue and much needed, and we would all pay tribute to the Minister, to whose enormous personal credit it is that the Bill has returned to the House at such an early stage. Millions of families are living on the edge of a financial precipice, and more and more fail to keep up with their debt repayments, driving them further into difficulty. We heard the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) referring to the data from some of the clearing banks about bad debts. It was reported yesterday that London Scottish bank, which specialises in lending to customers with weak credit ratings, has nearly doubled its provision for bad and doubtful debts. Clearly, the phenomenon is widespread.

As other Members have mentioned, it is important to understand the wider context, as the problem of over-indebtedness has deep social roots. It is a cultural as much as a social and economic phenomenon, and is an element of the competitive consumption and hyper-consumption which is part of modern culture and society, which exists at all levels of income, and which percolates down to those on lower incomes. That is why it is right and proper for Government to intervene. Such an endemic problem, with such deep social and cultural roots, needs to have a societal response, and only a Government can provide the framework to get to grips with that. It is therefore absolutely right to introduce this Bill, whatever the Monetary Policy Committee has done with regard to interest rates this afternoon. I do not know whether it has added further to the pain that we all suffer from time to time. Clearly, however, the problem of debt is deeply rooted, and it is right for the Government to address it.

Other Members have referred to some of the figures, and the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux has reported a 74 per cent. increase during the past seven years in the number of debt cases with which it deals. Yesterday, the Department published its own survey, conducted by MORI, on over-indebtedness. The Minister said that it provided some comfort because it showed that the percentage who find debts unmanageable is still relatively small, although that is subjective, as people were reporting their own feelings—the objective view of their indebtedness might be somewhat different.

Nine per cent. said that they spent more than half their incomes on total credit repayments—almost one in 10. That is an incredible figure. Other parts of the survey also struck me as worrying, such as the finding that 8 per cent.—a different 8 per cent.—spent more than a quarter of their incomes on unsecured credit repayments. Those are historic, unheard of levels. We are talking about a small proportion of people, but a proportion that is spending serious quantities of disposable income on credit repayment.

The most recent family spending report from the Office for National Statistics reveals that the problem extends across the board. The average British household now spends £592 a week. Its income is £570. So the average

[Adam Price]

British family are living beyond their means—admittedly by only about £20 a week, but of course that is itself an average. At one end of the spectrum, there are serious problems with unsustainable consumer borrowing.

It is obviously right for the Government to act quickly. The key problem with their proposals relates to the issue of rights and responsibilities, that mantra to which the Prime Minister likes to refer. The Bill gives consumers important new rights to apply to the courts or the Financial Ombudsman Service, or use the alternative disputes procedure, and to ask those authorities to consider whether a lender has acted unfairly. It does not, however, place any new duty on lenders to consider borrowers' means properly before granting loans. Some of us feel that the Government have not got the balance entirely right at this stage.

A wonderful parallel is the Consumer Credit Bill tabled yesterday in the South African Parliament by the South African Department of Trade and Industry. I am sure that there are very good relationships between the two Parliaments; if there are not, no doubt the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury will be able to facilitate them. The Bill, which was preceded by a draft version, proposes a maximum rate of interest and fees. Almost every country in the world with an interest rate cap is aware of the difficulty—the lender could get around it by introducing charges through the back door—and allows for it in legislation by rolling together interest rates and other charges. The South African Bill also imposes a maximum limit on consumer liability to prevent lenders from getting around an interest rate cap by extending the term of a loan.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the South African experience. Our worry is that a cap will prevent those at the lower end from being able to borrow. I realise that they will have to pay higher charges, but that is connected with their credit rating. What has the effect been in South Africa? We should bear in mind that the UK market is one of the most complex in the world.

Adam Price: At this stage it is only a proposal, so there has been no experience in the South African market. I think it fair to say, though, that the South African financial services sector is slightly more dysfunctional than that in the UK. I must be careful about what I say, but I think that part of the problem is due to the devolving of financial service regulation to the provinces. Each province takes a slightly different approach, so the situation in South Africa is slightly complex. But in the light of the experience of most other countries in which an interest rate cap has been introduced, I challenge the research that suggests that doing so deepens financial exclusion.

For example, research from Germany suggests that the opposite is true. There is a statutory responsibility in Germany to measure financial exclusion, which was introduced when the interest rate cap was introduced precisely because of the fear of financial exclusion. However, such exclusion has not happened; indeed, the opposite has occurred.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I used to live in Germany, and the problem with capping is that it pushes the problem underground; such people cannot get credit because interest rates are set according to the liability—to the risk. I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument, but setting a cap risks pushing such people into the black market, which is much more dangerous than the Minister's proposal.

Adam Price: I have some difficultly with that argument, although I am sure that that will happen to some extent. But if extortionate lending exists, it surely does not really matter whether it is legal or illegal. Are we really saying, "Such people are going to be exploited anyway, so they might as well be exploited where we can see them"? Surely the point is to try to minimise any exploitative or extortionate lending. By extension, one could advance the same argument in respect of the unfairness test, which, if it works, prevents the instances of very short-term loans with APRs of 1000 per cent. that we have witnessed in the sub-optimum market. We should respond by trying to introduce positive measures—by providing other means for people on very low incomes to access short-term credit, including credit unions and a reformed social fund. The hon. Gentleman is doubtless right to say that such things will happen, but we need to introduce other measures to prevent them from doing so.

The other interesting aspect of the South African Bill is the prohibition of reckless lending. The South African DTI is essentially placing a duty on the lender to meet his responsibilities, and to secure information about the borrower's current financial situation in advance of making a decision on the loan. Of course, "recklessness" has a well-rehearsed meaning in English common law, which the South African Bill sets out. It also introduces a new definition of over-indebtedness, and enables a new regulator to set the terms of repayment when a borrower has got into difficulty and needs some help getting out of it. So there are a number of interesting ideas in that Bill that the Minister might want to have a word with his South African colleagues about.

In modern politics, consensus is meant to be a universal good, but I must admit that when Front Benchers of all three main parties speak with one voice, a shiver goes down my spine. The more heretical voices that we have, the better. I am glad to hear that there are one or two such voices on the Labour Benches, and I certainly join them. There are three things that I will certainly push for during the later stages of the Bill's consideration. The first is the introduction of a responsible lending test, or at least the placing of a duty on the lender to take account of the borrower's ability to repay. That also gives rise to the question of data sharing, which the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) discussed.

Secondly, I should particularly like the Bill to address default charges. I am not completely clear about the current legal position of default charges. I was under the impression that it was already illegal, or certainly against the banking code, for default charges to include any profit margin.

Norman Lamb: That very point is being investigated by the OFT and referred to the Competition Commission.

Adam Price: It is certainly important to consider that issue because of the possibility of a perverse incentive for lenders to drive their customers further and further into debt, as we have heard—provided, of course, that they can make some repayment. Figures produced by Debt on our Doorstep suggest that banks made £3 billion last year from default charges, and we have all been on the receiving end of them from time to time. Certainly, enshrining the principle in law that a default charge can only represent the additional cost involved to the bank and ensuring that such things are transparent is worth considering.

Thirdly, the Bill should cover my much-cherished interest rate cap. The Minister very charitably said last time that he would look at that again, and now is a perfect opportunity for him to do so. Despite his assurances, we do not want to wait another 30 years to deal with the problem. Of course, we have taken six years to get from when the OFT pointed out the failings of the existing legislation on extortionate lending—as far back as 1999—to where we are now. Surely, it would be better to introduce an enabling clause to allow the Minister to provide interest rate caps through secondary legislation, as he proposed to do with other measures under the Bill, if only because, as has been suggested, such caps would constitute draconian measures to focus the attention of those people in the industry who perhaps need to be educated about their corporate social responsibility.

I was surprised to hear the Liberal Democrats citing Government evidence. After the dodgy dossiers that we have had from the Government, I would be careful about believing every unqualified thing that they produce in support of their policies. There is certainly fairly good reason to doubt some of the conclusions and data in the Policis report, and we have discussed that previously. Perhaps it would be possible for the Government to look again at some of the shortcomings of that research, certainly in relation to Germany.

Mr. Sutcliffe: The hon. Gentleman may remember that I said that, if any other evidence was produced in addition to ours, we would consider it. I am still waiting for it.

Adam Price: I shall review my staffing budget to find out whether it is possible to look into that, but there certainly seems to be some support among Labour Members for the idea of creating a reserve power—a Henry VIII clause—to introduce secondary legislation whereby the Minister could provide interest rate caps. Frankly, I have my doubts about some of the problems that have been raised by the Government, principally because such caps seem to work perfectly well in a wide range of consumer credit markets across the world. Interest rate caps are not the only answer to the problems and challenges that we face, but the Government should have them in reserve, as part of their armoury.

4.19 pm

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. First, may I congratulate my colleagues who have already spoken so well earlier in the debate? My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge) spoke with passion and eloquence worthy of his distinguished predecessor, and I am sure that he will continue in that fine tradition. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) spoke extremely eloquently. Indeed, another of my hon. Friends referred to her inner steel. I wonder, in fact, whether we have another "Iron Lady" on our hands. As could be expected, my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) spoke with great intelligence and passion. He is widely seen as one of the brightest minds within the Conservative party—indeed, something of an intellectual—and I hope that it is not an impediment to his career.

It is a great pleasure to pay tribute to my predecessor, Richard Page, who represented my constituency of South-West Hertfordshire for more than 25 years. He was renowned within South-West Hertfordshire for his diligence, energy, enthusiasm and good humour. He was a very effective and popular constituency MP. Indeed, on a personal note, I can say that he has helped me enormously over the past 18 months or so since I was selected to fight this seat. He has the rare but not unique distinction of having been elected to the House for two different seats both in by-elections—in Workington in 1976 and Hertfordshire, South-West in 1979. A hit rate of two by-election victories in three years is rather impressive for one individual and compares rather favourably with the aggregate total for my party over a number of years. We will not dwell on that.

Richard brought to the House his enormous business experience. He was a very successful business man in his own right and this was perhaps put to best use as a Minister responsible for small businesses in the 1990s. His success as a business man also permitted him to be in the position to enjoy his hobby of horse racing to a much greater extent in his capacity as a racehorse owner. Indeed, his knowledge of horse racing was also valuable to the House in one or two capacities.

I am aware, however, of one occasion when rather unexpectedly and uncharacteristically Richard missed a vote. He was subsequently asked to explain the reason for this, and he said that one of his horses had fallen into his swimming pool. Whatever happens in my career and whatever problems I may cause my hon. Friends in the Whips Office, I assure them that I will not miss any votes due to one of my racehorses falling into my swimming pool. However, Richard will be an enormously hard act to follow. Certainly, over the past few months, I have met many, many people in South-West Hertfordshire who have been very grateful for all that he has done for them as their MP.

The constituency of South-West Hertfordshire has changed greatly since Richard was first elected in 1979. It has retreated from its eastern boundaries, but advanced to the north, taking in the fine market towns of Berkhamsted and Tring. With all due respect to those areas no longer in the constituency of South-West Hertfordshire and that are now in the constituencies of Hertsmere and Watford, the changes have done much for both the beauty and diversity of my constituency, if not its compactness.

The north of the constituency falls within the splendidly named borough of Dacorum, which is the Latin translation of the Anglo-Saxon word for Danish. The borough contains Tring and Berkhamsted and the

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villages of Wiggington, Aldbury, Long Marston and Wilstone, as well as the town of Bovingdon and the villages of Chipperfield and Flaunden. They are all splendid places and I am delighted to represent them.

Perhaps the most significant historical event to fall within the area took place at Berkhamsted in 1066 when, following his victory at the battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror continued to advance through the country until the Anglo-Saxon nobles finally sued for peace at the site that is now Berkhamsted castle and surrendered to him, perhaps establishing the tradition of diplomatic surrender to the French that some might say continues to this day.

Towards the south of the constituency we fall within the Three Rivers district, the rivers being the Colne and its two tributaries, the Gade and the Chess, all of which meet in Rickmansworth. The area contains what could be described as the Metroland so beloved by John Betjeman. It includes the town of Rickmansworth, the village of Croxley Green, the area of the Moor Park estate and Chorleywood, where I am lucky to live. It also contains beautiful countryside, again on the edge of the Chilterns, and the pretty village of Sarratt. The area also contains, by way of diversity, the ex-Greater London council overspill estate of South Oxhey. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells how otherwise affluent areas have pockets of poverty. That is certainly the case in my constituency and South Oxhey is one such pocket in which there are real problems with poverty.

Politically, South-West Hertfordshire has been somewhat monotonous because, during its 55 years of existence, I am delighted to say that it has returned Conservative Members—first, Sir Gilbert Longden, then Geoffrey Dodsworth and then Richard Page. However, Labour Members might be interested to know about the area's contribution to this country's history of radicalism. In the 1840s, the Chartist, Feargus O'Connor, established a community in the area of Heronsgate, near Chorleywood, which he rather immodestly renamed O'Connorsville. The community contained 35 workers' cottages and there was an enormous lottery in which about 100,000 people participated, with the lucky 35 families moving to O'Connorsville. The community was supposed to be a workers' paradise based on the principles of socialism and temperance, but my hon. Friends will not be surprised to learn that as so often happens with utopian ideals, it unfortunately all ended rather badly and the 35 families left rather desolate and hungry five years later. It should be pointed out that during those five years, a public house was established, which was splendidly named "The Land of Liberty, Peace and Plenty", to which inmates could escape for a glass or two. I am glad to say that that still stands and is an excellent public house.

There is much that is good about South-West Hertfordshire and I am pleased and deeply honoured to represent it, but it has its problems. It has problems with crime and antisocial behaviour and I know of serious incidents over the past few weeks in South Oxhey, Croxley and Chorleywood. We have high-value houses, but that means that we have a worrying problem with affordable homes. However, we would strongly resist the proposal made by some of building all over the green belt. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke rightly pointed out the importance of protecting our communities and the green belt.

We have good and popular schools, but they are consequently often over-subscribed, which means that local children are unable to attend local schools. I shall certainly campaign to represent their interests strongly. There is a threat of cuts to our hospital services and in the past few days we have learned more about the financial position of our local hospital trust. I know that I speak for several colleagues when I say that I have great concern about the future of health service provision in Hertfordshire—we certainly have our worries in South-West Hertfordshire.

I shall turn briefly to the Bill. Several hon. Members have spoken passionately and eloquently about the worries that we all have about loan sharks and the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable. There is cross-party agreement on the basic thrust of the Bill, which I certainly share. Much has been said today about lawyers. I, too, was a lawyer, although thankfully I never advised a great deal on the detail of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. I use the word "thankfully" because that Act is notoriously complex and difficult to get one's head round. However, I occasionally advised on the one simple aspect of the Act: the £25,000 limit, which means that most of the Act's provisions do not apply to loans greater than that amount on the grounds that the principles of caveat emptor should apply to anyone who enters into such a loan.

I am conscious that that £25,000 limit is going in principle, although I note that there are two important exemptions. The first is loans to individuals for business purposes. That is a highly valuable service. I have on a number of occasions advised firms that want to perform that task and they would not want to go through the process of licensing. That is an important consideration. The second exemption relates to high net worth individuals, which I understand is a new concept with regard to consumer credit. I am sceptical about how well that provision will work. Having given advice many times on the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and its financial promotions regime, which has a similar exemption for high net worth individuals, I know that the exemption has not worked well over the past three years. In certain limited circumstances, it is being reformed in the context of the 2000 Act, and I shall be interested to see how that works out.

Although I accept the reason why the £25,000 limit is going, it is a pity, if only for the sake of the poor lawyer who does not have a detailed understanding of the 1974 Act, because it will make it even more complex for us to advise on. However, I appreciate that claiming sympathy for lawyers is not a particularly useful activity in the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

On a broader point, much though I appreciate the direction that the Bill takes and although there is much agreement between parties, we must always be careful about overregulating. The Prime Minister made a similar point when he referred to the Financial Services Authority in a speech only last week. Regulation can take us so far, but only so far. To outline a personal philosophy, which broadens the point even more, Governments cannot solve every problem. What can solve problems—what is good for society—is giving more power to individuals who have the energy and

enterprise to go back to the name of the public house from the mid-19th century to obtain a land of liberty, peace and plenty.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak, and I thank the House for its indulgence in listening.

4.33 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to offer my first contribution to the House in this important debate on the Consumer Credit Bill. I am also pleased to follow my hon. Friends who also made their maiden speeches—my hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller), for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) and for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge). I was interested to hear the description of Southend by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East as my birthplace happens to fall within his constituency. I shall probably have a few discussions about Southend with him in the months ahead.

The debate is important. The impact that debt has on so many people and families is profound. While the majority are able to manage their financial affairs effectively and make informed decisions in taking out debts and loans, many, unfortunately, are not. Often it is the most vulnerable members of our communities who are most affected by debt, and hon. Members on both sides of the House spoke about the problem.

Before I address specific points in relation to the Bill, as this is my maiden speech I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to my immediate predecessors, who served the constituency of Hornchurch well. I am sure hon. Members will agree that they have been a great credit to the House.

John Cryer was elected as the Member of Parliament in 1997. As many Members will know, John can best be described as independently minded, not necessarily following the line of his leadership or his party and being prepared to trust his own judgment and principles where he thought that appropriate and necessary. In the eight years that John served as Member of Parliament, he carved out a reputation in the constituency of being well respected and hard working, a real campaigning constituency MP. That reputation is well deserved. John led many campaigns in support of local residents and community groups, and his approach is one that I intend to follow.

The thing about John is that he is a very engaging, likeable character, and although we may disagree on a number of issues of policy, during the election campaign we always managed a courteous, good-humoured and good-natured relationship. That is a reflection of the character of the man and the way he conducted his politics. On a personal note, I wish John and his family the best for the future, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) will keep us well informed of his progress.

I should also like to pay tribute to Robin Squire. Robin served the constituency for 18 years, from 1979, and I am pleased to say that he is still serving his local community in his role as secretary to the Cleanaway Havering Riverside Trust, providing grants and other money to many valuable community projects in the area. Although independently minded in a different way, Robin served in government, as a Minister in the Department of the Environment, the Department for Education and the Department for Education and Employment. In the constituency, he was closely involved in a number of issues, particularly the rerouting of the A13 to ensure that it did not pass close to an important part of Rainham village. Robin was also instrumental in framing and developing freedom of information legislation, so he was a good parliamentarian as well as a good constituency MP. Robin has been a very good friend to me over many years, and I value the support and guidance that he has offered to me during that time.

Hornchurch is a fantastic seat to represent, and I am honoured to have been elected to serve the communities of Hornchurch, Elm Park, Rainham and Wennington. The constituency is located on the eastern reaches of London, bordering on Essex, and although it falls within the London borough of Havering, it has a very Essex feel to it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am pleased to see so many hon. Members from Essex here this afternoon. As an Essex boy, I am very proud to take on the responsibilities of serving the area.

The history of Hornchurch can be traced back to Saxon times, when the manor of Hornchurch was owned by successive English kings. The area was reputedly a favourite resort of Edward the Confessor. The origin of the name "Hornchurch", however, is somewhat unclear, with tales of the king hunting a stag near the church and of a bull killing a wild boar that was being hunted by the monarch. I hasten to add that there is not much chance of that happening on Hornchurch high street now. What is clear is that the church remains an important part of the local community, and the parish church of St. Andrew's, rebuilt in 1222, is a striking focal point, as it looks down from the hill overlooking the main area of the town.

Against that backdrop it is hardly surprising that there is a strong sense of tradition. There is also a strong sense of patriotism and national pride, with St. George's day being celebrated across the constituency. That, too, is grounded in a strong historical context. During the second world war, RAF Hornchurch played a central role in defending this country from attack and in securing a victory in the battle of Britain during the summer of 1940. During that period, Spitfires from 54, 65, 74, 222, 266 and 603 Squadrons defended the skies of southern England, and the names of many of the fighter pilots involved are commemorated to this day in a number of roads in the area that made up the old airfield.

It is not just the history; we are also blessed with so many parks and open spaces which help to create the character of the area. Rainham marshes lie to the south-east, where the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds maintains a significant nature reserve. Close by is the village of Rainham, with its conservation area full of character, and Rainham hall, which was built in 1729 and is maintained by the National Trust. From a cultural perspective, Hornchurch is a centre for the arts in Havering—based around the popular Queen's theatre, which provides local access to plays and other productions.

This is however an area with some challenges and some significant problems, too. Although we are lucky to have the Thames running through the southern edge of the constituency, it is in many ways marred by heavy

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industry, waste-transfer stations and polluting users. A recent study of the possibility of opening up Rainham creek to the north of the Thames for greater leisure and recreational use for local people revealed high levels of phosphates and a severely restricted ecosystem, making redevelopment much more difficult to achieve. Gravel extraction, landfill sites and other recent proposals involving industrial processes have highlighted an urgent need to regenerate and re-characterise Rainham.

That could happen through the redevelopment of the Thames gateway, which covers a significant part of the area concerned, but the vision proposed by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of high-density housing along the Thames riverside is not shared by many of my constituents. They are looking for a different type of development in that area. I will certainly be arguing from the Opposition Benches and taking forward in the House a very different vision for that area of my constituency.

Although I have talked about the sense of tradition in the community, what has unfortunately become all too prevalent is yobbish behaviour, which has made the lives of many of my constituents a misery. Statistically, Hornchurch is one of the safest places in the country. Unfortunately, for many of my constituents, it does not feel that way. It angers me that so many people feel that they cannot go out at night because it is not safe to be on the streets after dark.

Most recently, we had the threat of industrial action affecting the District line service covering part of my constituency, after a driver ended up with glass in his eye because somebody lobbed off a bridge a brick that struck his carriage. Graffiti and vandalism are also all too common, and the local police have told me that they have found traces of cocaine and other class A drugs in virtually every public house in Hornchurch. I have little doubt of the need for more police on the streets and a much tougher approach to people who think that they can get away with anything they want. That is simply not acceptable, and I shall be arguing forcefully from the Opposition Benches for the need to tackle such offences.

Some of the problems to do with drugs are driven by despair and a lack of hope. That leads me back to the issues being debated this afternoon. I welcome the fact that this Bill strengthens the protection for debtors by expanding the concept of an unfair credit agreement. My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) mentioned the impact that that has on constituency case loads and on the issues coming across our desks. In the short time I have been a Member of this House, I have already seen the impact that crippling debt can have on families and individuals.

A father and son attended my very first surgery to highlight the despair that they felt for the son who was struggling to make ends meet. On benefits and having been unemployed for a considerable period, he was finding it very difficult to make payments on some of this indebtedness. He had taken out a further re-financing loan at a higher rate of interest and, unfortunately, that had merely compounded the problems that he faced. It was moving to hear the story that was given to me by the father, who told me that he had used his life savings to help his son get out of difficulties. He spoke of the stress and strain of that relationship and the effect on his physical health. The narrative made a lasting impression on me, given that the physical and mental distress of that family were evident during the time they spent with me in my advice surgery.

I have no doubt that greater protections need to be afforded to people who are in vulnerable situations, particularly with refinancing transactions of the sort to which I have alluded. I welcome the intentions behind the Bill, particularly the provisions relating to unfair relationships. I share a number of the concerns that have been expressed in terms of the breadth of the definition. That goes to what is meant by an unfair relationship. As a lawyer—*[Interruption.]* I suppose that I had to declare an interest one way or another in the debate.

As a lawyer, I have always interpreted legislation on the basis that we must have as much certainty as possible. In this instance, we are dealing with advising the debtor or the creditor. As drafted, the Bill relies much on the development of case law. The right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle), who said that that in itself might deny justice to people who have got into problems, made a powerful contribution. I am sure that the issue will be taken further when the Bill is considered in Committee.

I was interested in the right hon. Gentleman's concept of a non-exhaustive list. Perhaps that is something that can be explored and examined in greater detail. There is a consensus on what we are trying to achieve. I fear that the way in which the Bill is drafted may prevent this. I see that the Minister is nodding. I hope that what has been said by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber will be considered carefully and reviewed as we consider the Bill.

It is an honour and a privilege to serve as the Member for Hornchurch. One of my local priests, the Reverend Bob Love, said to me that hope is one of the most valuable things that we can offer. In a small way, I will try to provide that sense of hope to my constituents, by standing up on the issues that matter to them, by listening to those who think that no one is prepared to be interested in their concerns, and by giving a voice in the House to those who have none. This is the challenge to which I look forward with great relish.

4.48 pm

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am not sure what the etiquette is for a Member who has so recently been a maiden himself—I broke my duck only 24 hours ago—in commenting on the maiden speeches of my hon. Friends. Sadly, I was not in the Chamber to hear the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), but I will read it with interest tomorrow. I will certainly purchase the DVD. I have known my hon. Friend for many years and I know that his speech will have been effective and thought-provoking.

I was privileged to be in the Chamber to hear the maiden speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller), for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) and for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire). My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke made an assured and confident speech. She showed a real love and affection for her constituency, which I think will

make her an extremely effective representative. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East made his constituency, particularly the pleasure pier, sound rather like Ibiza. Perhaps he and the son of the hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) can compare notes. Everyone who serves in the House believes that he needs to shore up his political capital in his constituency, but my hon. Friend is the only Member who must physically shore up his own constituency—£40 million is a small price to pay to keep it intact.

I greatly enjoyed the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire, although he made a slight mistake in using up a well-worn excuse with the Whips. It clearly worked for his predecessor, so perhaps he should not have discarded it so quickly. I am grateful to him for mentioning a former resident of my constituency, the poet laureate John Betjeman, who wrote beautifully about his constituency, as well the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and my own constituency. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch made a brilliant maiden speech that evoked the battle of Britain, the spirit of which he maintained in his determination to fight for his constituents, particularly on the issue of crime. He spoke movingly about his first constituency case, which involved a father and son who had got into great difficulties over debt.

Debt is the subject of the Consumer Credit Bill. Although I have run out of privileges, having delivered my maiden speech 24 hours ago, today's debate gives me an opportunity to make numerous gaffes and to trample unawares over the conventions of the House. I would be enormously grateful if my hon. Friends and other hon. Members would intervene to point out my mistakes. I still regard myself as a layman, and am surprised to find that with the introduction of the Bill the House has gone back to square one. The original Consumer Credit Bill was debated extensively in Parliament before the election was called. It received its Second Reading and completed the Committee stage, which consisted of eight or nine sittings. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) served on that Committee. After Third Reading, the Bill proceeded to the Lords, yet it is back in the House again. Perhaps one of the great virtues of our unwritten constitution is the requirement that we should go back to square one, but I would break with convention and be so bold as to suggest that we find a fast-track procedure for uncontentious Bills that have been subject to examination, even in a previous Parliament. When a new Parliament is elected everything that the previous Parliament did is forgotten, but in the 21st century we should move on.

Having attended a great deal of today's debate, it is a great pleasure as a new Member to witness a genuine debate. Most of the Bill is relatively uncontroversial, which may be why a genuine debate and exchange of ideas has taken place. I shall focus on two aspects of the Bill on which I have developed my thoughts as I have listened to hon. Members. First, however, I shall make a general observation about what the Bill is trying to achieve. Of course, we need to strike a balance and introduce the right amount of regulation, while allowing the free market to create the products of which consumers wish to take advantage. Individuals must take responsibility for their own actions, but the use of loans and debt effectively to enslave people in debt is reprehensible. There is no moral case for the 300 per cent. loan mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. The person offered that loan clearly did not understand it, and it would not be possible to repay the capital. Even in a relatively unregulated free market such loans and products should not be allowed to tempt people.

We have heard a great deal in this debate about the state of the British financial services market and we are fortunate in having a thriving credit card industry. We have heard that there are more than 1,300 credit cards on the market, but I came across a remarkable statistic that says a lot about what is wrong with the financial services industry. Half the people who enter a shop and leave with a store credit card will have had no intention of taking up such a card from the store.

As everyone knows, store credit cards tend to charge a far higher rate of interest than other cards. This very morning, I had a tyre changed on my car. I shall not name the organisation to which I went as it provided an excellent service in changing the tyre. I knew that I might have the chance to speak in this afternoon's debate, however, and I noticed on the cash desk a large glossy sign promoting a store card with an annual percentage rate of 29.9. Under existing law, that may not be an extortionate credit agreement, but it is certainly way above the rate of interest that any sane or financially sophisticated human being would want to pay.

I wish to declare an interest as several years ago I worked as a consultant for Virgin Direct, which provides Virgin's personal financial services; it is Richard Branson's financial services arm. Indeed, I now have a Virgin pension and individual savings account. When I worked for the company in the late 1990s, we ran a campaign to make financial regulation for personal consumer products much more transparent. Britain does not have the most sophisticated financial services industry in the world. The reason why Virgin went into that market is the same as that for which it goes into a lot of markets—it can spot an opportunity. It spots an industry that is complacent and that has forgotten about the needs of the consumer and is not providing innovative products. One of the products that Virgin brought to the marketplace was the current account mortgage, whereby people could pay off their mortgage effectively because it was treated as an overdraft. People could pay it off from their salary, and they could do so much more rapidly than with a conventional mortgage.

I learned from that experience that, interestingly, Australia and New Zealand appear to have a far more sophisticated and consumer-oriented financial services market. I will be interested to hear from the Minister, either at the end of the debate or in the future, what consumer credit laws those countries have. I suspect that they have a relatively straightforward and laudable approach.

One of the campaigns that we ran, which resulted in some Government action, related to the creation of CAT standards by the Treasury. The Treasury has its own sophisticated marketing arm, and the great Treasury brains got together and decided on CAT, which stands for charges, access and terms. The idea was that the "charge" aspect related to making clear the charge for a product, whether it was an ISA or a pension. In order to meet the CAT standard, the interest

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charge would have to be within 1, 1.5 or 2 per cent. "Access" meant being able to get in and out of a product without being hit by hidden charges, and "terms" meant that people were aware of all the terms that were in the wiring of the product, as it were, or the small print.

We were dealing with very straightforward products such as ISAs and personal pensions. In effect, they were the sort of financial products that the middle classes use, but the consumer could still be hit by hidden charges and find themselves paying far more than they expected. That was the case at, if I can put it this way, the most honest end of the financial services spectrum. It is a matter of some regret to me that the Government did not pursue CAT standards and make more of them. I think that they took the view—I made this point at the beginning of my speech—that there was a fine balance to be struck between regulation and the service of the free market, and that they were concerned about being seen as over-regulating or heavy-handed. If Ministers had displayed more will, however, CAT standards would have taken off.

I have no doubt that the free market has worked. Two legacies of the stakeholder pension, which, again, has not been as successful as it could have been, is the driving down of charges and increased transparency in the financial services arena. The Government do not need to worry too much about intervention to protect the consumer.

By and large, financial products are opaque and sophisticated, but they should be simpler and more consumer-friendly. I support the Government's objectives of making APRs as simple and straightforward as possible, of eradicating small print and turning it into big print and of making sure that such products are not marketed aggressively or deceitfully.

I am especially interested in two issues, the first of which is the interest rate cap. To be honest, I did not have a strong view on the matter before I heard hon. Members debate it this afternoon. As a Conservative, my instinct is to oppose a cap as a regulation too far, but I cannot see how, even in the free market, anyone can justify loans at 300 per cent., 500 per cent. or 1,000 per cent. If there were an interest rate cap, such loans would not be available—a Labour Member made the telling point that they should not be available in the first place because they are a hiding to nothing.

I recognise the dangers of regulation and of setting the financial situation in aspic. If the industry moved on after the introduction of an interest rate cap, it would be left with a relic from the past. I do not want to sound too much like a Liberal Democrat, but I wonder whether a possible compromise is an interest rate threshold above which products must be licensed. That idea may be worth examination, or it may be my second gaffe and one of the stupidest ideas ever heard in this Chamber.

I have been extremely interested in the discussion about clause 19 on unfair relationships, which, I suspect, will be the main focus of debate in Committee. I agree with my hon. Friends that the Government should examine providing extra guidelines, because clause 19 is neither fish nor fowl. On the one hand, it may be too widely drawn because perfectly respectable lenders who have made perfectly responsible lending agreements could be vulnerable to frivolous and vexatious claims in which the courts would be asked to consider whether any part of those agreements is unfair. On the other, as we have learned from the 1974 Act, it may be drawn so widely that the courts are reluctant to intervene, even in cases in which the terms are clearly unfair. I urge the Minister to set out guidelines for the courts on the respective bargaining powers of the relevant parties, on the marketing and making of loan and credit agreements, on the availability of information, on small print, and so on and so forth.

I welcome many other aspects of the Bill, such as the creation of an ombudsman and the need for creditors to provide regular statements to debtors. However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) that the four-week check could inadvertently spawn a huge amount of bureaucracy.

One issue that has often come up in my surgery—I do not know whether the Minister will have an opportunity to address it—is that of credit ratings. Many people have been given a bad credit rating by mistake and find it almost impossible to plough through the maze in order to have it removed. It is almost Orwellian or Kafkaesque. One is judged guilty, is unaware that one has been so judged, and when one pleads one's innocence it seems almost impossible to reverse the judgment.

We have talked extensively about people being seduced into bad credit deals, and that is partly due to the lack of personal finance education in our schools. People are happy to debate sex education at the drop of a hat on the radio and television shows on which I frequently appear. We constantly debate the merits of sex education in schools and recognise the importance of our children being properly educated in that regard, yet in purchasing a house or taking out a loan, which are some of the most important transactions that they will undertake—I thought that I would have to choose my words carefully—they enter the financial world as naked as the day they were born. Personal finance education is not as attractive a subject as the other one, but it is extremely important.

Finally, I echo the point made by the hon. Member for West Bromwich, West about the need to deal with add-on products. All too often, a relatively benign product can be sold to a consumer only for them to be almost compelled to purchase a financial product that they do not need and has extremely unfair terms. We must ensure that lenders are not in a position to do that much too easily.

5.7 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I apologise to the Minister, and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for missing his speech. I wrote to the Speaker to say that I could not be in the House at that point. As I led for the Opposition in Committee on the previous Bill, I can perhaps anticipate what he might have said, but I promise to read it tomorrow.

They say some things never change. In my first Parliament, I was frequently the last Conservative speaker—the wind-up speaker, as it were—and in my third Parliament nothing has changed. However, I do not mind this afternoon, because I have been inspired to even greater confidence that the Conservative party will be returned to Government very soon. The reason for

my new-found confidence is the quality of the speeches that we have heard from our new Members—my hon. Friends the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller), for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke), for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire); and, although it was not his maiden speech, by my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey), who has spoken for two days running. All were extremely impressive. They spoke with such passion about their constituencies that I am tempted to talk about Tewkesbury, but I think that you would rule me out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I hope that my hon. Friends will forgive me for not going into each and every speech due to the lack of time and the fact that there were so many. I would just say that I am proud to call them colleagues and look forward to working with them all. I am sure that they will make great contributions not only to the Conservative party but, more importantly, to the work of this House. Parliament has become weakened in recent years, sad to say, but I am sure that their contributions will help to restore some sense of proportion

All my hon. Friends mentioned their predecessors, and I too pay tribute to them. I saw Richard Page very recently at Epsom races on Friday, which will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire.

As I said, I served on the Committee that considered the Bill and spoke on Second Reading, Report and Third Reading. The issue is of great interest to me because I had Front-Bench responsibilities for it before the general election. I appreciated the Minister's openness and I am glad that he brought the measure back to the Commons as quickly as he could. Although we welcome it, he knows that, in Committee, I tabled many amendments, none of which were accepted—I wish the team who serve on the Committee better luck. The Minister might just slip next time—I accept that he did not on the previous occasion—because some aspects of the Bill could be strengthened.

I always remember the words of my grandfather, who said, "When you're in debt, you're in danger." That is true, but it is also true that some borrowing is necessary. Some businesses have to borrow, and some people have to borrow to get through a difficult time in their lives or perhaps to realise an aspiration. It is important that the opportunity to borrow exists, but, as has been said, indebtedness and defaults on debts are increasing.

Although it is true that much debt is to do with mortgages, many mortgages nowadays are remortgages to cover previous debts on credit cards and so on. We are now in an era when we may make a deal for a five-year mortgage. Let us imagine that we borrow £100,000. At the end of the five years, when we come to renew the mortgage and perhaps look for a better deal, it is unusual to take out another £100,000. Instead, the figure would probably be £110,000 or £120,000 to cover something extra. Although that is linked to the house, the sum does not necessarily cover only the mortgage; it often covers other debts. I therefore do not believe that we should ignore the high level of debt in this country.

The 1974 Act was introduced in a different era—it seems such a long time ago. I was 16 in 1974 and I remember someone bringing an electronic calculator to school. It seemed like a revolutionary machine. Much has changed since then. I therefore welcome the Government's attempts to deal with the new status of consumer credit. Our objective must be to strike a balance between protecting people and not overburdening what are by and large good businesses that provide a good service. We should have available credit but try to ensure that people are not ripped off or end up with more debt than they can manage. That is easy to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) described how he was persuaded to take out a credit card with a £3,500 limit. He has far more resources than me, yet I ended up, against my better judgment when I was not paying attention at—I will name the company—Marks and Spencer, with a credit card with a limit of £7,500. I did not ask for that credit card. I thought that I would get a card that simply gained points so that the next time I went to the store, I would get 10 per cent. off. It was not sold to me especially accurately and it was only when I showed it to my secretary that I realised what it was. The ease with which I got that card struck me as possibly dangerous. It is easy to get into debt and borrow money. It is much easier to borrow than to earn money. We must remember that.

We have heard a little about the lack of education about debt. We rightly warn people of the dangers of alcohol, cigarettes—perhaps I should not mention that campaign—drugs and other things. However, we rarely, if ever, educate people about the dangers of debt. Many years ago, perhaps it could be said that I had more debts than was good for me. It is depressing to go out to work and find that most of one's income goes on paying past bills and debts. It is perhaps even worse when someone in employment takes out a loan, then things go wrong or they find themselves unemployed, and they simply do not have the money to pay off their debts. We really must consider the importance of educating people about debt.

We also need a very good regulatory regime, and I know that that is what the Government are trying to achieve. I am not quite sure that we shall get there as a result of this Bill, although I broadly support it, as I did last time in Committee. However, certain aspects of it need improvement. The main difference in this Bill is the change from a test for extortion to a test for unfairness, which I welcome. However, it is extraordinary that the 1974 Act included a definition of extortion, yet this Bill contains no definition of unfairness. We have moved from defining what is illegal to not doing so, which strikes me as odd. There are many drawbacks involved in that move. Lenders will not know what is illegal but, more importantly, neither will borrowers. How is a vulnerable borrower to decide whether to go to court to get an agreement struck out when he and, more importantly, his lawyers do not know what is legal and what is not? It has been pointed out that, until a number of court cases have established case law on this matter, there can be no certainty. I do not therefore believe that these measures move us forward quickly enough in the right direction.

We have also been told that the Office of Fair Trading will issue guidelines. Well, we heard that in January. At that time, I asked in Committee when that would take place. It is now June and we still do not have the

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guidelines. Even more worrying is the increased power that the Bill will give to the OFT. I have come across a similar problem before, and the Minister knows the example that I am going to cite. I have an interest in horse racing; I represent the Cheltenham racecourse—the greatest racecourse in the world—which is in the Tewkesbury constituency. The OFT carried out an investigation into the running of the horse racing industry that was potentially destructive, because it simply did not understand the industry.

However, the most depressing aspect of the matter for me, as a constituency Member of Parliament, was that I had no way of affecting the OFT's decision. I had no access to its representatives; I could not go to see them. I could write to them, and I got some bland replies, but I could not bring the case to the House and ask the appropriate Minister to intervene. Actually, the Minister did his best—in fact, I think that there were a couple of Ministers involved, as the matter spanned two Departments—but the issue had already been referred to another body that had the potential to destroy a very important industry. In the light of that experience, I am very concerned about giving the OFT the powers contained in the Bill.

Regarding the lack of a definition of unfairness, it is even worse that the Bill will apply retrospectively. It is not even as though lenders will be able to say, "Well, from now on, we are going to be very careful." They can say that, of course, but in the case of agreements that have already been drawn up, it will be too late. Retrospective legislation should not be encouraged. I know that there will sometimes be grey areas in which it might have to be considered, but I do not think that this is one of them. I also expressed my concern about this in Committee.

I am also worried about companies that make small loans—companies that collect £5 a week from their customers who, by and large, seem very happy with the arrangement. This legislation could be a bit heavy handed for those lenders. By and large, they seem to do a fairly good job and they are quite popular with their customers, and I hope that the new provisions do not cause problems for them. Those small loans can be very helpful to people.

I am also concerned about the problem—I am not sure whether the Bill addresses it at all—of people who get into trouble by borrowing not necessarily from one source at a high interest rate but from a number of sources. Someone who applies for a mortgage is assessed in terms of their income and so on, and they either get the mortgage or not. The same care is not taken, however, when someone applies for a credit card. It is therefore very easy to borrow £2,000 on one credit card, £2,000 on another, and £2,000 on another, which ends up as an awful lot of money. When we considered the Bill, we heard the sad case of the gentleman who committed suicide because of his spiralling debts from 22 credit cards. The fact that he had so many cards is exactly why he got into that situation.

I discussed the ease with which cards are issued with the industry and received the rather bland response, "Well, okay, that is the risk we take". If there are enough people with credit cards, it can afford one or two dropping out—I am paraphrasing what it said—so it does not take as much care on loans of £2,000 as it might otherwise do. That is okay if someone has only one loan of, say, £2,000, but when they have 10 loans, which they have been able to get because of the lack of data sharing, the situation ends up being very serious. I want the Government to examine that.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I am not nearly as sanguine as the hon. Gentleman in relation to mortgaging and remortgaging when lenders are now offering sums equivalent to five times income. That is a matter of genuine concern. My question relates to responsible lending: is not there an onus on the industry, including all the major banks which now find that they have substantial bad debts on their books, to lend more responsibly?

Mr. Robertson: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I think that most would do so. As with most legislation, we are addressing the small percentage of cases in which that does not happen. Most borrowers would probably take an interest in what they were borrowing, examine the interest rate and assess whether they could afford it, but some do not, and that is the group whom we are trying to help. That is a difficult balance, and legislation needs to be shaped to take those different circumstances into account.

With regard to the proposal for an interest rate ceiling, I agreed with the Government in Committee and opposed that not only because it is my natural tendency to want to see the free market work, but because practical problems can also arise. The interest rate charged is not the only difficulty—other charges can be levied, such as a charge made when a loan is taken out, a charge made for running an agreement, a charge made for defaulting, and a charge made for sending letters to borrowers who have missed payments. I remember one example of a loan that I had many years ago. The lender claimed that I had missed the end payments, I said that I had not, and I had to take a solicitor's advice. I won the case—I did not owe the lender the money that it was suggesting. The lender, however, wrote to me and tried to charge me £20 per letter. I wrote back to it saying, "That is fine, I charge £30 a letter." Most people would not have my nerve or confidence, and would end up with a lot of debt because of that. My point, therefore, is that the interest rate is not the only factor about which we need to be concerned.

As I said earlier, I would have preferred a guideline—I tried to introduce such an amendment in Committee—under the unfairness test in the Bill perhaps considering prevailing interest rates at the time and the relative strength of the parties. Including such guidelines would not mean that other things could not be taken into account by the courts—the Minister's argument was that the court's hands would be tied if the Bill were too prescriptive. I do not think that that would be the case, however. The court could consider other factors if the wording of the Bill were right.

Maximum interest rates could have the effect of dragging up the average of the interest rates charged, and as the Minister said earlier, could exclude those who need to borrow at the lower end of the market and who take out short-term loans. I know that those tend to be the people whom we are trying to protect, but again it is a question of striking the right balance, and I do not

think an interest rate ceiling is the answer. I do not think a Minister—not this Minister in particular, for I trust him entirely, but Ministers in general—should have the authority to introduce such a draconian measure.

A suggestion that I made in Committee does not seem to have been adopted in the new Bill. Under the "half" rule, someone can take out a four-year loan to buy, say, a car, with the option of returning the car after four years and ending the loan altogether. I have spoken to representatives of both sides of the argument, consumers and motor manufacturers, and I am convinced that that degree of uncertainty helps no one. I think that when people can get out of an agreement in that way, interest rates may become somewhat higher than they would be otherwise. The caveat emptor rule should apply, and those who take out a loan for four years should have to pay it off. We must have balance and fairness. I know that the Government consulted widely at the time, and I should like to know whether they have made any progress.

By and large I welcome the Bill, and recognise the need to update the 1974 Act. I hope that the Minister will be a little friendlier to the new Committee than he was when I was trying to get certain amendments past him, because I think the Bill could be improved. It needs a few more teeth in some respects, and needs to be less burdensome in others. It does not quite strike the right balance. Nevertheless, it represents a good step forward, and I wish it and the Committee well.

5.27 pm

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): At the risk of repeating what others may have said already, let me say that I welcome the Bill. The existing legislation is more than 30 years old, and in that time we have seen many fundamental changes in our attitudes in society and to our attitudes to borrowing money and consumer credit.

Credit cards have become a way of life in the United Kingdom. Many of us are quite capable of managing our credit card debts, but others are not. In 2004, Citizens Advice Scotland published debt research entitled "On the cards", which showed a 64 per cent. increase in card debt since 2001, with the average debt in Scotland approaching £13,500. I believe that part of the reason is the order in which credit card payments are made. Customers are given the impression that they are paying off the high-interest debt first, or at the very least are not given the opposite impression. In fact, they are paying off the lower interest first. Most responsible credit card providers would recognise that every customer would prefer to pay off the debt with the highest interest first: that is only logical. The only reason for leaving the high interest to be paid off later is a desire to make more money at the customer's expense.

I do not believe that we can trust the market to reform itself, or to reform the system alone. We cannot rely on those who seek to make a profit from lending money to make and implement changes, and to regulate themselves adequately. I should like the Bill to give the Office of Fair Trading power to impose fines without limit—which the Financial Services Authority already has—and to include a requirement for statements of account to be issued on short-term loans lasting less than 12 months. I should also like to see restrictions on high payment protection insurance offered on short-term loans, which has already been mentioned today.

The Bill's aim, however, is clear. The credit industry is needed to assist those with long and short-term financial needs, and indeed to assist modern life in general. We all use cards and we all use credit. There is a need to modernise and to adapt in order to provide a significantly more responsible market. The credit industry makes hundreds of millions—perhaps billions—of pounds. I doubt whether legislation such as this, or many of the suggestions made by Members today, will damage the industry; in fact, they can only serve better to protect the British public.

5.30 pm

Charles Hendry: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I should be grateful to respond to some of the comments made in today's debate. It has been of an extremely high standard and we have addressed a wide range of issues of tremendous importance. We have also been privileged to listen to five remarkable maiden speeches from my Conservative colleagues, and I pay tribute to each and every one of them. They spoke with great clarity, passion and enthusiasm, and they are people from whom I know we all look forward to hearing a great deal more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), with whom I worked very closely during his time as the head of Conservative party policy, has an outstanding brain and I am delighted to have him as a constituency neighbour. He will be a very doughty campaigner, following on from Archie Norman's work in campaigning for issues in Tunbridge Wells. If my hon. Friend can secure improvements to the A21, that would be of great benefit to the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Michael Jabez Foster), as well as to my own constituents. My hon. Friend said that on one occasion, Archie Norman described him in three rather damning words, but the three that I would use today are "Excellent—keep going." It was a pleasure to hear the great fluency with which he spoke to the House today.

It was also a great privilege to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller), who gave us a fascinating insight into her constituency's history. It is a much longer, broader history than most of us have imagined, driving past it on the M3. She will clearly be a tremendous champion of what is best for her constituents, and she will ensure that the best of the past is preserved, while being ready to campaign on future challenges. It is clear, too, from the way in which she spoke how engaged she already is with the issues affecting her constituents.

I also listened with great interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge). He spoke in the best tradition of Southend—East and West—in being a strong, powerful, clear and determined voice for his constituents, and a resolute local campaigner. I was struck, however, by his evident admiration—almost over-admiration—for all things from Tunbridge Wells. After my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells said that he had a peer in his constituency—Lord Mayhew—my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East said that he had a pier as well: one of the largest in Europe. He said that he had something of a love affair with Tunbridge Wells, but I became slightly concerned when he told us that his constituency was gradually slipping closer to Tunbridge Wells, moving across the Thames and into Kent, which we

[Charles Hendry]

in the south-east would of course greatly welcome. His was a very impressive speech and we look forward to hearing from him further.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) also spoke with tremendous fluency and showed a detailed and insightful understanding of the issues in this Bill. He spoke of the dangers of racehorses for Members of Parliament. When the late lamented Donald Thompson missed a vote, he explained that he had been at the races. His Whip, Spencer Le Marchant, who happened to own a racehorse that he was keen to sell, got him out of trouble by selling him a third of that racehorse, which immediately went lame and never won anything again. So my advice is to steer clear of racehorses. But the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire was extremely impressive and we look forward to hearing from him again.

Of the five of my hon. Friends who made maiden speeches today, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) is the one who actually gained a seat at the election. His was a remarkable result and I congratulate him on a tremendous gain. He spoke with enormous fluency, and with great warmth about his predecessor, John Cryer. Many of us would be very happy to see John Cryer back in this House—albeit in a very different constituency—although that might not be quite in keeping with the Labour Whips' wishes. My hon. Friend will clearly be a very effective campaigner on the issues affecting his constituents.

Those speeches provided us with a remarkable tour of English history: of the Romans in Basingstoke; the Saxons in Hornchurch; the Normans in South-West Hertfordshire; the Stuarts in Tunbridge Wells; and the Victorians in Rochford and Southend, East. I am not quite sure about Wantage, although we are very glad to see the end of the "Jackson" era. All those speeches revealed a group of Members of Parliament who are extremely dedicated to their constituents' interests. That filled me with tremendous hope because I believe passionately that the Conservative party must look more like the country that it aspires to represent.

In the speeches that we have heard today, we have heard from Conservative Members to whom people can relate, whom they will trust and feel are truly plugged into their constituencies and by whom they will be very well represented. I had better stop there for fear of incurring your wrath, Madam Deputy Speaker, or giving anyone the impression that I am setting out my credentials for the leadership of the Conservative party. *[Interruption.]* I hear the demands, but I shall resist them all the same.

Mr. Love: They all come from this side.

Charles Hendry: That has always been the case; my allies are always on the Labour Benches.

What we have heard during the debate has been tremendous support for the Bill's principles but, nevertheless, a great deal of concern about some of the details. Virtually every hon. Member who has spoken called for more details, starting with the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle), who made a remarkable speech and to whom tribute was paid by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

What is clear is that we come to the Bill from different perspectives. We are looking for different aspects of the detail to be provided because we may be ultimately looking for different things to emerge. The Minister therefore owes it to us to provide us with that detail as the Bill goes for consideration in Committee, so that we can clearly see what is in his mind. I simply do not believe that the Government are dealing with a blank piece of paper on this issue.

I know the way that the civil service works too well to think that the Government have not got those things worked out. If we start to come up with thoughts in Committee, they have got reams of paperwork already prepared, which they will be able to use to explain why certain bits should, or should not, be included. We want the Minister to provide more detail in Committee, so that we can fully understand the Bill.

There has been a great deal of talk, too, about the need for transparency and to help consumers understand what they are signing up to. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) spoke about that with a great deal of eloquence. It is going beyond the call of duty that, having led for the Opposition in the debates on the previous Bill, he has taken part again today. Perhaps he would like to serve again on the Standing Committee. He would be extraordinarily welcome.

My hon. Friend also said that credit deals are often extremely complex and confusing. People think that they are signing up for one thing but end up getting something else. Any hon. Member who has tried to buy a car recently will realise that choosing the type of car, the engine size, the colour and the interior is only the easy part; it is when one comes to working out how to pay and all the ramifications of the huge range of options available that it gets truly confusing. What all hon. Members want on behalf of consumers is a system whereby they can really see what is proposed.

I listened with great interest to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey). I particularly agree with him about the need for personal financial education. We are letting young people leave school and education without an understanding of the deep and detailed financial issues that they will be required to deal with extremely soon after leaving. We owe it to them to give them that sort of education, and I hope that the Minister will talk to his colleagues at the Department for Education and Skills to ensure that they are aware of that.

Concern has also been expressed about leaving such issues to the courts. Again, that issue was raised by the right hon. Member for Leeds, West and the hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey). I share their concern that many consumers are terrified of going to court, that their experience of court has probably been negative and that the idea of taking on a major financial institution is the sort of stuff that they believe happens in John Grisham novels, not something that ordinary people want to face in their ordinary lives.

We need to take as much of the detail away from the courts as possible and put it in the Bill, so that the consumers and the credit institutions know what they

are dealing with. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East was very eloquent in talking about the dangers of leaving the courts to decide the details and in highlighting the need for caution in making the Bill retrospective.

There has been much discussion about interest rate caps by the right hon. Member for Leeds, West, and by the hon. Members for West Bromwich, West and for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price). The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), whom I was remiss in not welcoming to his brief at the beginning of the debate, was quite right that the worst cases where consumers have been let down occur when people have borrowed from multiple sources and no one has checked whether they can pay back the money. That is a bigger issue than the level of interest rate caps. I am convinced that introducing interest rate caps would not help those in greatest need. There is no doubt that those who lend to those people would start to withdraw and people would borrow from unscrupulous, illegal or unchecked lenders. The most vulnerable consumers would end up losing out.

Caps would also threaten to close down whole sections of the credit industry—for example, pawnbrokers. Most of us would not think it unreasonable if somebody in need of cash took their television set to the pawnbrokers and left it there in return for £50. If they went back a month later and retrieved it for £60, that would for many people seem to be a good way of evening out their cash flow. It is actually an APR of more than 1,000 per cent., so if we start capping APRs at an arbitrary level, we will close down an extraordinarily important part of the credit industry.

An undercurrent through the debate has been the general anxiety about the levels of debt in our society. That point was mentioned by the hon. Members for North Norfolk and for Hastings and Rye. The latter spoke eloquently about the survey by the Tomorrows Peoples Trust, an outstanding organisation with a good reputation on this issue and for training young people. He had interesting ideas on how the problem should be stopped and how we can stop people taking on debt that they simply cannot afford.

This is not just an issue for people on the lowest incomes. Debt now affects people in all parts of the country and of all income levels, as my hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells and for Basingstoke made clear. It is particularly an issue in the south-east where the cost of housing is so high that people are forced to take on extra levels of borrowing and debt to meet their bills. That is particularly an issue for young people.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr spoke about how, week on week on average, people spend beyond their means—£20 a week, £1,000 a year. This is a massive problem and one of which we must be aware.

The measures in the Bill enjoy our support, but we believe that it can be improved in Committee and that the Government need to be much bolder if they are going to tackle debt-ridden Britain. They need to wake up to the growing crisis of a country in ever-greater debt and the evidence that people are struggling more and more to keep up with their repayments, as shown in today's press reports. Debt is growing by £1 million every four minutes; it has grown by £80 million in the course of this debate. Some £1.1 trillion of debt is a massive millstone round the necks of families across the country. As we have heard in the debate, that often ends in misery and sometimes tragedy.

The Government need to start by putting their house in order. They are the biggest serial debtor of the lot, with the Chancellor the natural heir to Viv Nicholson, who won the pools and went on to spend, spend, spend until there was nothing left. Although the Chancellor can put up taxes, and he does, to cover his spending, the public do not have that option. In just eight years, debt in Britain has doubled and the Government need to be less complacent and more willing to recognise the extent of the threat.

To continue, however, in the vein of constructive dialogue in which the debate has been carried out, I recognise that this is an important Bill. We support it. However, it can be improved, as every Member who has spoken has pointed out. We look forward to working with the Minister in Committee and hope that he will be willing to take changes on board. It may be another 31 years before we have the chance to review the legislation again so let us get it right now.

5.43 pm

Mr. Sutcliffe: With the leave of the House, I wish to respond to what has been an excellent debate. Ministers often say that it has been an interesting and excellent debate, but do not really mean it. However, I can say wholeheartedly that this has been an excellent debate. We have had 16 speeches and numerous interventions on the Front-Bench spokesmen from Members interested in a subject that affects all their constituents. That is an important point. The House is often criticised for not being relevant to the issues of the day that affect people's lives, but I hope that the people who have watched the debate will know that all the Members involved, whatever position they take, are keenly aware of the issues surrounding consumer credit.

I pay tribute to the maiden speeches that have been made by the hon. Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller), for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) and for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire). They were quality speeches, and although I do not want the same things for the future of Conservative party as the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) does, I know that the constituents of those Members will be well represented by the way in which they operate in the House in times to come. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr. Brown) on making a maiden speech, in the sense that his constituency's boundaries have changed.

Ian Stewart (Eccles) (Lab): And it is your anniversary.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I remarked earlier to my hon. Friend, who is acting as my Parliamentary Private Secretary, that the maiden speeches reminded me of my maiden speech and that my by-election victory was on 9 June 1994, so I am celebrating my 11th year in the House today. One important thing for me over those 11 years

[Mr. Sutcliffe]

has been that we should agree and work together when we can. Clearly, politics plays a part in our proceedings, which is why the hon. Member for Wealden made his political points about the state of the economy. All I would say in response to him is that with low interest rates, low inflation and more people in work than ever before, we have a sound economic platform.

We cannot be complacent about examining what is happening to individuals and their circumstances, which is why the Government wanted to introduce the Bill. However, the Government have to work with industry and stakeholders to ensure that they present effective legislation that can work. The consumer credit White Paper showed the need to reconsider legislation, owing to the 30-year interval since the Consumer Credit Act 1974, but it was important to move forward with the consent and support of the industry and stakeholders. Those stakeholders will be heartened by today's debate, because there has not been a party political divide between people's viewpoints. It was clear that people felt, as the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. Bacon) indicated, that some practices, which are perceived to be outrageous approaches to vulnerable people, are immoral.

As the Minister responsible for the Bill, I wanted to bring it back to the House quickly, given that we only just failed to get it through in the last Parliament. The Bill fell because there was inadequate time to discuss it in the Lords after the announcement of the general election, but I wanted to keep the momentum going. Those of us with experience of such matters, whether we are lawyers or involved in the industry, know that people try to move in different directions when consensus breaks down, so it becomes difficult to keep momentum going. It is important that we keep the momentum going, because the Bill and its principles will affect vulnerable people, in particular.

Norman Lamb: The Minister talks about momentum, so will he give us some indication of the time scale for implementation, which is clearly important?

Mr. Sutcliffe: The House will have the opportunity to consider the Bill in Committee—I am sure that the Whips will be happy about the competition for places on the Committee. I hope that we will be able to negotiate with the House authorities so that we can get the Bill through its Commons stages as soon as possible and it will go to the other place in the autumn. We will try to get its implementation worked through as soon as it receives Royal Assent. However, as hon. Members have said, the implementation requires a balance between fair regulation and working with the industry to ensure that information technology systems and other matters are addressed, and ensuring that consumers are protected.

It is clear that there is some disagreement about the unfair credit test, so I am sure that we will have a detailed debate in Committee about why we prefer to take a broader viewpoint on what the test should be. The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) has raised the role of the Office of Fair Trading with me on many occasions in the context not only of horse racing, but of the principles of the Bill. Following the Competition Act 1998 and the Enterprise Act 2002, the Government were asked to move away from being involved in the detail of competition issues so that the market could be allowed to determine matters, so it is ironic that we are now being asked to ensure that we curb the OFT's powers. A balance must be struck. The OFT reports each year to the Department and the Secretary of State. The powers that we are giving it on licensing are vital because it is important that those who lend money are the appropriate people to do so.

Mr. Bacon: On the unfairness test, does the Minister accept the point made by the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle), that many individuals involved in such cases do not want to get anywhere near court? If so, what does he have to say to him? It is one thing to say that an alternative dispute resolution is available, but people—in particular those at the lower end—do not need a neutral arbiter, but need someone to stand up for them against these wicked people?

Mr. Sutcliffe: Again, that has to be seen in the context of what the Government are trying to achieve across the piece with the work in the Treasury on financial inclusion. I take the point about the onus being on responsible lending. Notwithstanding what the hon. Member for Wealden said about civil servants having the answers and Ministers following the line put to them, I was struck by the quality of some of the interventions.

I undertake to consider what can be done on credit issues, but the alternative dispute resolution is important and should not be put to one side—nor should the distinction that enables courts to consider such things. The existing extortionate credit test is not appropriate and has not worked, but we are moving in the right direction. Our proposals should be considered against the background of working with the industry and stakeholders to achieve something that is workable. If all that happens is that the industry sticks its foot out because it does not want to participate, it will find ways around the legislation. The idea is to go forward with as much consensus as possible. However, as I said, I shall consider things in great detail, before the Bill is in Committee, if that is possible, or while it is in Committee—certainly, before we discuss it on Report—to see what we can do for the most vulnerable people at the lower end of the market.

We used statutory instruments on consumer credit legislation to introduce transparency in the way in which agreements are drawn up. We also introduced the loan shark projects in Birmingham and Glasgow. I am happy to say that they are working well. So it is not just a case of what is in the Bill. The wider context has to be considered as well.

Again, we have heard the arguments for and against interest rate caps.

Mr. Love: I am convinced by the evidence, especially that produced by Bristol university, on the negative impact of a cap on interest rates. However, I have attended lively debates in which there is still a bit of give and take on that. Evidence from Europe and other places suggests that there are ways to get around some of those negative impacts. Is the Minister still prepared to discuss the issue? Will he look again at including a power that can be used should the evidence change?

Mr. Sutcliffe: Hon. Members who have worked with me know that I am prepared to consider all aspects of the problem. I told the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price) that we would look at evidence from elsewhere, or at evidence that is in addition to the information that we have gathered. The opportunity to do that is while the Bill goes through its various stages.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) is an expert on such matters. I enjoyed his contribution immensely, even if he is from Leeds, which is close to Bradford and we do not always enjoy the best of relationships. His speech gave an idea of the problems faced by people on lower incomes who are at the bottom end of the market and are hit by illegal moneylenders, who prey on them with violence and in other ways when they cannot pay back their loans.

We need to put the Bill in context. Consumer credit can be a useful tool to consumers if handled in the right way, with a balance between it and saving. The Bill is necessary. Thirty years is a long time for a piece of legislation to be in force, and it has now become out of date. We will work hard in Committee. With excellent contributions by Members on both sides of the House, I am sure that we will get it right. I undertake to ensure that we listen to them and discuss the merits of all amendments tabled in Committee. I hope and know that the House will ensure that when the Bill becomes law, it will be the right piece of legislation to meet the concerns of the industry and consumers. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

CONSUMER CREDIT BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 83A(6) (Programme motions),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Consumer Credit Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

Proceedings in Standing Committee

2. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 30th June 2005.

3. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Programming of other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

Question agreed to.

CONSUMER CREDIT BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Consumer Credit Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown or the Office of Fair Trading by virtue of the Act, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

Question agreed to.

CONSUMER CREDIT BILL [*WAYS AND MEANS*]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Consumer Credit Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the imposition of charges on persons who hold licences under the Consumer Credit Act 1974 or who apply or have applied for the issue or renewal of such licences, and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

Question agreed to.

Christopher Rochester

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Joan Ryan]*

5.55 pm

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): First, may I say how grateful I am to have the opportunity to raise the case of my late constituent, Christopher Rochester, once again in the House? I spoke of this tragic case in my very first Adjournment debate in October 2001 and it is with great regret and sadness that I have to tell the House that Christopher's family continue to fight for justice.

I want to focus my remarks on what has happened in the case since October 2001, but it may be useful if I set out the circumstances in which Christopher Rochester died. Christopher was a young man of 24, born and bred in Chester-le-Street in my constituency. In June 2001, he travelled to the island of Rhodes for a summer break, as thousands of young people do every year. He was staying with his brother Keith, who had been working on the island. Christopher was a bright, intelligent young man, educated at the Hermitage school and New college, Durham. As his mother said to me, he had everything to live for. He travelled to Rhodes from Newcastle airport on 7 June 2000 and, sadly, by Sunday 11 June he was lying dead in a Greek hospital mortuary.

Early that morning Christopher had been found at the foot of the balcony of the apartment in which he was staying in Falaraki. He had fallen from the balcony on to the concrete patio below. Remarkably, he survived the fall. I have been to the scene, and it is indeed remarkable that he did so. What followed for Christopher, however, was a slow, painful, lingering death in the Andreas Papandreou hospital in Rhodes. The treatment that he received both before arriving at hospital and while he was there was nothing short of disgraceful.

First, Christopher had to wait 40 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. Still conscious and being comforted by his brother Keith and friends, he was, in his brother's words, "shuffled" on to a stretcher and placed in the ambulance. Despite Christopher's complaints of severe back pain, no attempt was made to immobilise him or protect his neck, which is common procedure with back injuries. Having arrived at the hospital, he was received in the accident and emergency department and seen by a junior trainee doctor, Dr. Pavlidis. The doctor attended to the cut to the back of Christopher's head and ordered an x-ray to be taken of his back. The x-ray was taken and a possible fracture to the coccyx, in the lower back, was diagnosed.

Christopher, although in severe pain, was simply admitted to the orthopaedic ward. He continued to complain of a deep thirst—a sign of severe shock—and by that time his lower back had swollen to a large degree. He was given a pain-killing injection, but his thirst continued and his pleas for water were ignored by the staff. It was left to his friend, David Vest, to ferry cups of water from a drinking fountain in the corridor.

It being Six o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Joan Ryan.]

Mr. Jones: David stayed by his friend's bedside and drifted off to sleep, only to be awoken abruptly by a member of staff half an hour later—a nurse in a very agitated state who asked him to leave. A curtain was drawn around Christopher's bed and a few minutes later a female nurse emerged to inform David that Christopher had died. Grief-stricken, David had the terrible task of having to tell Keith, Christopher's brother, that he had died. Keith then had to make the heart-wrenching decision to ring his mother to tell her that her young son was no longer alive.

The events of Sunday 11 June 2000 were tragic, but the way in which Christopher's family has been treated since can be described only as cruel, and the actions of the Greek authorities have led only to an increased feeling of real injustice on behalf of the family.

When Christopher's body was returned to the United Kingdom, it was taken to the University hospital of North Durham and a pathologist carried out a post-mortem in order to establish the cause of death. That, however, was hampered somewhat by the fact that Christopher's left kidney was missing. For some unknown and unexplained reason, it had been retained by the Andreas Papandreou hospital on the island of Rhodes.

Pam Cummings, Christopher's mother, was deeply upset by that news and contacted my predecessor, Giles Radice, who with the assistance of the British consulate in Rhodes got the Andreas Papandreou hospital to send the kidney back to the UK via the consulate. When the kidney arrived at the University hospital, for some unexplained reason—to this day she cannot explain the reason why she did it—Mrs. Cummings asked the local coroner, Mr. Andrew Tweddle, whether he would have it DNA-tested. Arrogantly, he refused, which added to the distress of the Cummings family. Undaunted, Mrs. Cummings paid to have the kidney tested privately by a leading independent genetics service in the north-east, North Gene, and to her horror her suspicions were proved right: the kidney was not that of her son Christopher.

We are now nearly four years on and there has still been no plausible explanation of why the kidney was removed and subsequently disappeared. The only suggestion that has come from the Greek authorities is that the British consulate in Rhodes must have somehow mixed up the kidney with another when it was taking responsibility for it. Frankly, that is an absolutely ludicrous and unacceptable explanation.

I have raised this issue again because the kidney is a vital piece of evidence in the case, and I turn to the reasons for that. Professor Redmond, who did the detailed report for the inquest in this country, was highly critical of the Greek pathologist's report on Christopher's death. The Greek pathologist put the death down to the fact that the renal artery and vein to the left kidney had been clearly severed and that his kidney was attached to his body only by the urethra. Professor Redmond disputes that for one clear reason: if that had occurred, Christopher would have been dead within less than an hour and possibly within less than half an hour due to massive blood loss through the severing of those two vital vessels.

The more plausible explanation put forward by Professor Redmond is that there was a small tear in the artery or vein that caused slow blood loss, and if

untreated clearly led to Christopher's death. He states in his report that he does not understand why the left kidney was removed. He goes on to disagree completely with many of the Greek autopsy's conclusions.

If Christopher's left kidney had been left in place along with the attached artery and vein, it would have been simple to diagnose the cause of death as put forward by Professor Redmond. That demonstrates how important the missing kidney is to this case, although that is completely dismissed by the Greek authorities. It has never been mentioned in the court cases or in any of the investigations.

I have never been a conspiracy theorist but, for me, it is clear that the kidney was removed and retained to hide the truth surrounding how Christopher died. It should be borne in mind that the autopsy that took place in Rhodes at the Andrea Papandreou hospital was carried out by Dr. Stefif, who was employed by the hospital. I understand that there was no independent coroner or panel of coroners on the island at the time. It has subsequently come to light from information that the family received that two of the doctors who stood trial for the death of Christopher were present at the autopsy at the hospital.

It is remarkable that the person who undertook the autopsy, Dr. Stefif, has never been called to give evidence in any of the trials that have taken place, or any of the investigations into Christopher's death. The response to the missing kidney from the Greek authorities is that the kidney that has been provided is that of Christopher, despite independent DNA evidence to the contrary. I find it amazing that the Greek authorities seem to care little about the fact that the kidney, still residing after four years in the University hospital of North Durham, is clearly a Greek citizen's kidney.

On 14 January 2004, I received a letter from Baroness Symons, a Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, informing me that the investigation into the missing kidney had been closed. I and Christopher's family were grateful to the former Minister with responsibility for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), for raising the issue with his Greek counterpart. I am grateful also to Baroness Symons for her letter of 21 March, which stated that the consulate in Athens would be pursuing the issue, and in particular the identity of the kidney that was sent by the Andreas Papandreou hospital to the UK.

I put on record my thanks to the consular staff in Athens, and also locally. When I have been there with the family I have seen them work very hard. They deserve mention and credit.

No one among Christopher's family and friends will be surprised if the answer that they finally get from the Greek authorities is that the kidney no longer exists. One of the people present at the autopsy has privately told the family's solicitors that the kidney was removed and thrown away. Although the witness is not prepared to put that on the record, he has on two occasions contacted the Greek solicitors. He is clearly in fear of his career and his future on the island of Rhodes.

I shall move on to some wider issues that are connected with getting justice for Christopher, for which the family have been fighting now for more than five years. It took a further two years from my raising the case in the House in October 2001 for the case to go for trial. The family twice flew to Greece before being told that the case was to be adjourned. On the third occasion, however, the trial went ahead on 27 September 2003. A verdict was reached and those responsible for Christopher's death were found guilty of homicide through neglect. The front page of the *Daily Mirror* summed it up with the headline, "Justice for Chris". Sadly, the ironic twist is that that verdict has been overturned.

Dr. Pavlidis—along with Dr. Karavolias and Dr. Sokorelos—was sentenced to three years for manslaughter as a result of neglect, but was bailed pending appeal. I attended the two-day appeal with the family and heard the devastating news. At the conclusion of the hearing there was no recess to consider the judgment, which the Greek solicitor representing the family found very unusual. The three judges in court simply held up sheets of paper in front of their faces to discuss the verdict. Within minutes, they lowered the sheets of paper and announced, almost dismissively, that the three doctors were to be acquitted. There was not a recess to discuss the evidence and, even though the evidence was stacked up against the doctors and the defence did not add any new evidence, the verdict was overturned.

If that was not bad enough, the formal written verdict has not yet been issued. The family's solicitor says that it should have been issued within two weeks of the initial appeal verdict, which was given on 8 February 2005, but we are still waiting for it. Yesterday, I spoke to the family's solicitor in Athens, who suspects that the court on Rhodes will delay issuing it until August, when the Greek legal system virtually closes down for the summer, which means that he and the family will not have any time at all in which to look at the document or make a legal response.

The issue needs to be addressed urgently. I am stunned by the fact that this can happen in a state that is a fellow member of the European Union. Having attended the court in Rhodes four times with the family, I am appalled by the shambolic nature of that justice system. When I raised the case four years ago, the main issue was medical negligence, but my concerns have widened. I have doubts about the care and medical facilities available on the island of Rhodes, and I am also anxious about whether the family of a UK citizen can secure justice and a fair trial there. I do not wish to castigate the entire Greek legal system, but there is a particular problem on that island, given the way in which the case has been handled.

I assure the House that Christopher Rochester's family will not give up their fight for justice, and neither will I give up the fight to find the truth. The family are considering taking their case to the European Court of Human Rights, and they may mount an appeal at the Greek supreme court if they are not thwarted by the lack of time to examine the published appeal verdict. This week, their solicitor initiated civil proceedings for damages against the Andreas Papandreou hospital. The family have never been concerned about compensation, but they have spent nearly £20,000 pounds fighting the case, even though they cannot afford it. They have been ably supported by family and friends, and they are clearly determined to find out the truth. They have the

[Mr. Jones]

support of many people in my North Durham constituency and the north-east, and they have received expressions of support from people around the country.

I wish to close with the salutary thought that, the longer this case goes on, the worse it will look for the Greek medical profession and for the Greek legal system, but most importantly, the worse it will be for the family of Christopher Rochester.

6.15 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) on securing this debate. Let me acknowledge at the outset the diligence and concern that he has brought to the matter as the local member of Parliament for that community.

The subject of the debate is the case of Christopher Rochester, who, as the House has just heard, tragically died in Greece on 11 June 2000. I welcome the opportunity to set out our position clearly in relation to this case and provide my hon. Friend with some clarity on the options available to the Cummings family.

Before concentrating on the specifics of the case, it is worth noting the close ties that Britain enjoys with Greece, a fellow member of the European Union. Greece has a well-established judicial system that has developed to meet the traditions and needs of its people. Some 3 million British tourists visit Greece each year, enjoying the beach resorts and cultural heritage on offer. The vast majority do not experience any problems, but inevitably, serious accidents do happen, and where the deaths are compounded by errors and negligence, the trauma to the victims' families is all the more difficult to cope with. The case of Christopher Rochester is unfortunately one of those cases.

My hon. Friend spoke at length about the case of Christopher, and in particular the two outstanding issues that continue to cause distress to the Cummings family: the recent acquittal, which will lead to a lengthy appeals process, and the urgent need to resolve conclusively the whereabouts of Christopher's missing kidney. I sympathise deeply with Mr. and Mrs Cummings and will ensure that we do all we properly can to assist them in resolving these issues.

I would like to address the question of Christopher's missing kidney. It is very regrettable that, five years on from Christopher's untimely death and four years on since the case was discussed in this House, the issue of the missing kidney is still unresolved. We are determined to resolve the uncertainty over the identification of Christopher's kidney. The hospital coroner in Rhodes, Dr. Stefis, has been unable to produce any evidence to contradict the findings of the Durham coroner that the kidney sent to the United Kingdom was not Christopher's.

As a result, we are continuing to challenge the Greek authorities' identification. Our consular staff in Athens have recently raised this with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting it to pursue this issue urgently. Our consul in Athens followed that up on 1 June. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has contacted the Ministry of Health and is awaiting a response. Our consul in Athens will continue to pursue this matter with the Greek authorities. Prior to this, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), my predecessor as Minister for Europe, also raised our concerns about this case with his Greek counterpart during his visit on 8 March.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham explained, the three Greek doctors accused of manslaughter were acquitted on appeal on 9 February. Our deputy head of mission from Athens and our consular staff on Rhodes attended the trial to provide support to the Cummings family. Our consular staff have given additional practical support to the family by attending each court hearing. That is exceptional, as our consular staff do not normally attend such court cases.

I understand that the appeal court's decision has caused more distress to the Cummings family in what has already been a tragic case. However, we cannot interfere in the Greek judicial process or comment while the case remains sub judice. We understand that the family's lawyer needs to study the appeal trial transcripts before he can determine whether there is a case to take to the supreme court. We will continue to monitor the case closely and remain in contact with Mr. and Mrs. Cummings on any developments. We also remain in close contact with hospital staff in Rhodes who have indicated that they would be willing to co-operate closely with the Cummings' lawyer during the appeal process. Once all legal avenues have been exhausted, we can examine what further options are available to the Cummings family if the appeal is unsuccessful.

I fully understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the circumstances of this case, but I would like to highlight the huge effort and commitment, which he generously acknowledged, of our consular staff throughout its duration. I assure the House that our staff will continue to pursue the Greek authorities regarding Christopher's missing kidney, and we hope that this distressing issue can be resolved as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes past Six o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 26 May 2005

[MR. EDWARD O'HARA *in the Chair*]

Millennium Review Summit

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Gareth Thomas.]*

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): I am grateful to Mr. Speaker for allowing this debate on the millennium review summit. In Britain, we often take for granted the lasting peace in Europe that we have enjoyed during the past 60 years. We also often take for granted the global trading rules that allow us to buy electronics from China or clothes from Lesotho, the eradication of smallpox and the successful containment of the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus. Those achievements are due to many nations and many remarkable individuals within those nations, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. Before we proceed any further, I must inform hon. Members that, under the rules of the House, there are no Deputy Speakers in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Thomas: I stand corrected, Mr. O'Hara, and I am grateful for that information.

Although the various achievements that I initially outlined are down to many nations and many remarkable individuals within those nations, they are in no small part due to the role played by the United Nations. Through all its guises, forums and agencies, the UN helps to bring nations around the same table to talk, to set international standards and rules and to co-ordinate activities such as disease control. In Afghanistan, for example, a young girl who was denied the right to education under the Taliban owes in part her better life chances to the UN. Other nations have, of course, played their part, but through the UN's co-ordination of support to her Government, that young girl now has a better chance of going to school, drinking clean water and staying healthy.

In Africa, those who are HIV-positive and who are perhaps dying of AIDS rely in part on the United Nations to help them stay at school and gain access to care and the anti-retroviral drugs that they need. In short, they rely on UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and UNAIDS, which help in their different ways to support people touched by the AIDS epidemic.

Sixty years since its formation, the UN remains critical to our increasingly interconnected world. It has done and is doing great work, but it could improve its performance in some areas. We must recognise that the roles played by the UN are becoming even harder to fulfil as the world changes and the challenges become even more complex and interlinked. We cannot say that we have succeeded in securing development, peace and human rights for many of the world's citizens, which are things that we perhaps take for granted in the United Kingdom.

That is why the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called last year for radical thinking on how the UN can drive forward its action on development, security and human rights and on how the UN needs to change to be fit to reach its goals. Eventually, that call led to the publication of the high-level panel report and the millennium project. In turn, Kofi Annan drew on those reports to produce his report, "In Larger Freedom", which was published in March and which sets out the agenda for the millennium review summit in September. At the summit, the heads of all 191 nations of the UN will have the opportunity to commit themselves to action in respect of four elements of the report—development, security, human rights and UN administrative reform.

The summit will provide an opportunity to review progress towards meeting the millennium development goals to which the international community signed up five years ago. The international community promised that it would do what was necessary to ensure by 2015 that every boy and girl is in school, that no child dies from a preventable disease and that world poverty is halved. Given present rates of progress, primary education for all will not be achieved until 2130, which is 115 years late; poverty will not be halved until 2150, which is 130 years late; and the elimination of avoidable infant diseases will not be achieved until 2165, which is 150 years late.

The millennium review summit gives us the opportunity to refocus international attention on what we need to do, the practical commitments that will make changes on the ground and the reforms to the UN system that are necessary to make it fit to play its part in that process. The Commission for Africa and the Secretary-General's reports, both of which came out in March, agree that it is possible to achieve our promise of halving world poverty, which will require both developing and developed countries to fulfil their existing commitments. Developing countries need to fulfil their commitments to govern well, to build sound institutions, to tackle corruption, to protect and promote human rights and to uphold the rule of law.

Some progress has been made. Democratic elections have taken place in the past few years in Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Africa and Ghana. Some 24 African countries have signed up to review each other's governance performance and to make improvements based on those assessments. Eight countries are implementing, and another 12 are committed to implementing, the extractive industries transparency initiative.

Improvements have been made in the business of government, and that progress is beginning to pay off. Average economic growth in Africa is about 5 per cent.—the figure is much higher in some countries—which is having an impact on the available resources to tackle poverty. In Mozambique, for example, the percentage of the population who live in poverty has been reduced from 69 per cent. to 54 per cent. in the past five years. In Malawi, half of all children did not go to school in 1990, but by 2001 that fraction was less than one fifth.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): The Minister referred to the extractive industries transparency initiative. Is he aware of, and would he be concerned by, evidence demonstrating the involvement of British citizens—or, indeed, a British citizen—in oil deals in Darfur, the contents of which did not comply with the guidelines in the initiative?

Mr. Thomas: Because we want to make sure that transactions involving oil and other extractive industries are transparent and do not act as a disincentive to countries to improve their governance and sort out their economic situation, which has happened in the past, such allegations would give rise to concern. I am not aware of the allegations that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, but if he wants to talk to me later, I shall be more than happy to have a conversation. As his intervention suggests, more needs to be done on improving governance and on ending conflicts more generally.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend has said, ending conflict, particularly in Africa, is the nub of the problem. I do not entirely go along with the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short), who has said that conflict resolution is needed before development strategies can be implemented. Does my hon. Friend think it a weakness in the millennium development goals that the targets do not specifically mention conflict resolution? Surely conflict resolution should be included in the millennium development goals.

Mr. Thomas: The millennium development goals do not need specifically to refer to conflict resolution. If we want to make progress on tackling poverty, most people recognise that we must first tackle conflict. Indeed, the Secretary-General's proposals, which will be discussed at the millennium review summit, include several proposals on tackling conflict and—this is equally important—on building an effective peace in the immediate aftermath of a conflict. Sadly, we know that 50 per cent. of conflicts that have stopped eventually start again, so the international architecture must be improved if the number of conflicts that restart is to decrease.

Mr. Drew: As the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) knows, the African Union is working incredibly hard in Darfur in its own limited way, but the problem lies in the ad hoc way in which the UN, or whoever is acting on behalf of the UN, works. There are no ground rules to determine the deployment of a peacekeeping force, and we could take up with the UN the dream of a multilateral force that could be sent in at least to prevent a conflict from getting out of hand. Will the Government consider that suggestion seriously?

Mr. Thomas: I accept the substance of my hon. Friend's point, which is that we need to do more, particularly in the immediate aftermath of a conflict, to put the right arrangements in place to prevent that conflict from restarting and to speed the process of development. The Secretary-General's suggestion of a peace-building commission backed up by a peace-building fund to enable measures to be implemented quickly is very positive, and nations can discuss it further in the run-up to and at the millennium review summit. It builds on some of the lessons that the international community has learned in not only Darfur, but other conflicts.

Developed countries, too, need to deliver on their commitments. We must ensure that our policies are not only good for us, but good for developing countries. On trade, for example, we must deliver as early as possible on the Doha round, which concerns allowing developing countries to benefit from increased global trade, by providing greater access to our markets, by reducing agricultural subsidies and by providing support to help build the capacity of countries to trade for themselves. In that context, the WTO meeting in Hong Kong at the end of this year is key to making progress.

On the environment, we must continue to tackle climate change, which will have a particularly damaging effect on poor countries and poor people, by taking action now and developing a new international framework for beyond 2012.

On research and development, we can provide incentives so that our pharmaceutical companies are interested in developing drugs that tackle diseases that affect not only our communities, but the developing world.

On corruption, we can ensure that we in northern countries are transparent in all our dealings with developing countries and that we ratify the UN convention against corruption.

We can directly support developing countries in the important ways to which my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) alluded. We can more effectively support countries when they come out of conflict through more and better aid and more effective humanitarian assistance.

Finally, developed and developing countries can work together to invest in an international system that works.

At the millennium review summit, we want to prioritise the need to secure more and better aid in order to make progress on those objectives, particularly in relation to Africa. In that context, the excellent European Union agreement, which was reached on Monday, to make more money available for development assistance in the next 10 years is particularly welcome, and I hope that it will set an example for other nations to match and even to go beyond what the EU has done. We must provide more and better aid and support for countries moving out of conflict and engage with the wider reform of UN humanitarian efforts and development organisations.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): We are all very pleased to see the increase in resources devoted through the EU. However, the Minister will be aware of the great concern, which has been expressed for some time on both sides of the House, about the efficacy of the EU's aid. Has he received sufficient assurances that that extra money will be well used and well targeted, and that it will be properly accounted for? What assurance can the Minister give the Opposition that that increase in resources will really make the difference that everyone wants?

Mr. Thomas: The concerns expressed, particularly by the Opposition, have been about the way in which the European Commission has spent the member states' money that it had allocated for development systems. During the past five years in particular we have seen substantial improvements in the distribution of development assistance. More could be done, however, and we are discussing with the European Commission the further reforms that we want to see. In particular, we want the European Union to commit more of its money to the very poorest countries, as opposed to middle-income countries.

More generally, there is an issue about how EU states, in committing themselves to give more aid, can better co-ordinate that assistance to reduce the transaction costs for developing countries. Sadly, there are too many donor missions to developing countries, whose civil services and Ministries often have limited capacity. The most effective officials and Ministers often have to spend too much of their time talking to donors about how to spend their money. A series of proposals on improving the effectiveness of the international aid effort were agreed through the development assistance committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. They are currently on the table, and we are discussing with other nations how we and they can co-ordinate assistance more effectively.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): On the point about the effectiveness of aid, has the Department had the opportunity to reflect on the Tanzanian Government's decision to break their links with Biwater, following what is considered to be a failed arrangement for privatising the delivery of water services to Dar es Salaam? The Department has provided many millions of pounds to assist in the privatisation of utilities, so will it now reflect on whether that decision was a wise one?

Mr. Thomas: Of course we are aware of the decision that the Tanzanian Government have made. I am not in a position to comment on it, because it may be subject to legal action.

On the hon. Gentleman's more general point, it is important that the UK continues to prioritise helping to improve sanitation and increase the access of the very poorest people in the world to supplies of clean water. We shall clearly need the private sector's expertise in that process, and it must be for developing country Governments to decide how that expertise is used. Once they have asked us to help them help their populations gain access to clean water, and once they have decided how they want to do that, it is incumbent on Governments such as our own to provide support in the most effective way. Of course, we need to learn lessons from the example of Tanzania, as the hon. Gentleman said, but we perhaps also need to understand the bigger message, which is that there is a still a huge amount to do to give the people of developing countries access to clean water. More resources, and the expertise of those in the private sector, must be brought on board to help with that.

We have set out our objectives for 2005, and they include more and better aid and supporting countries that are moving out of conflict. We also want a series of UN reform measures to be achieved at the millennium review summit. The UK is uniquely placed to act as a powerful motor in that process. As president of the G8, the UK has called on the richest nations of the world to sign up to action on Africa and on climate change at Gleneagles. That will help to set the agenda for the September summit. From July, the UK will also be president of the EU, which means that we will speak on its behalf at the summit and can help to drive forward its commitments both before and afterwards.

The millennium report project, on which Kofi Annan's report partly draws, argues that global aid will need to rise initially by about $100 billion a year if we are to achieve the millennium development goals. The Commission for Africa report states that we need to double aid to Africa if that country is to achieve the millennium development goals. That would require an increase of about $25 billion a year. The aid is needed because poor countries do not have the resources necessary to increase growth, to invest in building their capacity to trade and, more broadly, to reduce poverty.

The Government are committed to increasing our aid to the agreed 0.7 per cent. of gross national income by 2013. We are calling on other countries that have not already done so to make a similar commitment. The target agreed by the EU earlier this week is an important signal of the progress that is possible, and we hope that that will put further pressure on other countries to deliver.

That incremental growth in aid will, frankly, not be sufficient. With that level of increase, it will be too late to achieve the millennium development goals. We therefore propose trying to front-load the aid by raising additional resources on the international markets through the international finance facility. Kofi Annan's report endorses that facility, and there is growing international support for the IFF. France, Italy, Germany and Sweden have already declared their support. We want the facility to be launched this year. We hope also to launch a pilot facility—the idea is supported by France, Italy, Sweden and others—to provide immediate finance for immunisation; that will save the lives of 5 million children now and of 5 million adults later.

We are considering French and other proposals on other innovative ways of raising additional resources for development. We also want to build on the success of heavily indebted poor countries and 100 per cent. bilateral debt relief by securing commitments to our proposal for 100 per cent. multilateral debt relief. We have already agreed to pay our share of eligible countries' multilateral debt service; I welcome the fact that Canada and the Netherlands have agreed to join us, and I hope that others will do so.

We want to secure commitments this year to improving the quality of aid. As the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) rightly said, more needs to be done, and quickly, to maximise the effectiveness of the international assistance that we hope will become available. Numerous studies in recent years have shown that our aid would be considerably more effective if it were provided in the right way. Governments who are trying to decide whether to recruit more nurses or to build more clinics are not always sure whether they will have the donor resources in the long term; it is an incredibly difficult decision. As I said in answer to the hon. Gentleman, many countries are faced with the difficulty of too many donor missions

[Mr. Thomas]

taking up the time of their most effective Ministers and officials. Donor countries are already committed to improving the way in which they give aid. We need to ensure clear targets and indicators in time for the millennium summit, so that donors can be held to account.

We welcome Kofi Annan's proposal that additional resources must be provided to support developing country-led plans for scaling up efforts to achieve the millennium development goals and other priorities. We need to support their plans to invest in governance, in opportunity and growth, and in the health and education of their people, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights—a subject on which the international community has been too reticent, but which is critical to making progress not only on HIV and AIDS but on other millennium development goals.

As well as more and better aid, another priority for the UK in September will be improving the way in which we support countries emerging from conflict. In January, the UK published a paper on fragile states that committed us to do more, to be proactive, to find new ways of getting help on the ground in traumatised or embattled places, and above all to use our development programmes to deal with the root causes of conflict. Kofi Annan is right to say that security and development are not sustainable one without the other, so we support his recommendation for a UN peace-building commission, a peace-building support office—and, indeed, for a standing fund for peace-building.

At the moment, no single place within the international system is responsible for supporting countries emerging from conflict to get from the peace-keeping phase to sustainable, peaceful development. We also need to address the gaps in international co-ordination, in planning and implementation, and in the availability of finance for that phase. We are therefore working with other Governments and the UN on the details of that peace-building commission and fund; we hope that that key proposal will be signed by other nations at the millennium summit.

A further priority is to make progress on improving the UN's response to humanitarian crises; it is in the interests of the world's most vulnerable people. During the past 12 months, we have had plenty of reasons for wanting to tackle that issue. No crisis is simple, and we all need to improve how we respond to them. The Asian tsunami and the crisis in Darfur have demonstrated that we could and should be doing better.

The UK has already played an important role in calling for reform. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a speech at the Overseas Development Institute in September that set out some proposals for reform of the humanitarian aid system. That included making clear our belief that new funding should be made available to enable the UN to deploy assistance early, at the moment when a crisis develops, without having to wait for donors and their bureaucratic processes to raise new funds.

We also want to make sure that resources are available to spend on the crises that the international media have, perhaps, forgotten—in places such as Haiti, Colombia and those that bilateral donor programmes are, perhaps, failing to reach. We also want to see improved leadership and co-ordination from the UN system in developing countries. In the very worst crisis, the Secretary-General should be able to authorise his humanitarian co-ordinators to direct the different UN agencies on the basis of one joint assessment of need, using one common plan and drawing on one source of funding. Using that logic, the UK has already offered some £40 million of humanitarian funding for the UN humanitarian co-ordinator in Sudan for him to deploy in places where he judges it can be spent most effectively.

We also need more funding for disaster risk reduction. We need to strengthen the UN's disaster reduction agencies. Clearly, if we can help countries to plan for natural disasters, we can mitigate their impact on people. We are pleased to see that Kofi Annan's report picks up many of the ideas out there about the reform of the disaster risk reduction process, and we are pushing to get more nations to sign up to them at the summit in September.

The millennium review summit offers an excellent opportunity to push for a step change in how the UN development system operates on the ground. Progress has been made on issues such as the competition for scarce resources by agencies, the jostling over responsibilities by some agencies, inflexible procedures, fragmented decision making and too much bureaucracy in the UN system. The UN can point, for example, at the establishment of UNAIDS as one example of how the different parts of the UN system can adapt and come together to offer a more co-ordinated and effective response to the AIDS epidemic.

However, the UN development system and its agency programmes can do more to co-ordinate with national development plans such as poverty reduction strategies. In his report, Kofi Annan suggests that reforms could include, in the longer term, grouping the various agencies, funds and programmes into

"tightly managed entities, dealing respectively with development, the environment and humanitarian action."

Beyond the millennium review summits, those are the sorts of issues on which we need further discussions, to deliver a more strategic UN development system for 2015 that works more effectively with other parts of the international architecture.

We are a nation that has always looked beyond its borders; we have always felt a responsibility to those in need whom we have never met and for tackling the poverty that still scars our world. The Government recognise that it is in Britain's interest to have a strong, effective United Nations. If the UN did not exist, we would have to invent something very like it. The organisation is by no means perfect. However, without the UN, our ambitions to tackle poverty, promote security and challenge human rights abuses would be all the more difficult to achieve. The summit in September offers the opportunity to build on the work of the Commission for Africa and the G8 summit in Gleneagles, to deliver the progress that we all want on more aid, more debt relief and fairer trading rules. It offers the opportunity to take forward specific commitments that will help with those objectives—specific commitments on peace and security, on setting

up a peace building commission, and on reforming the human rights machinery of the UN system, the humanitarian aid system, and, potentially, the wider development architecture of the UN.

We are just 10 years from the deadline for meeting the millennium development goals. The summit is a key moment in our journey towards that goal, but it is clear that more needs to be done. We believe that the Secretary-General's report represents an excellent agenda for the summit, and we hope that other nations will play their parts in making the summit a success.

3 pm

Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness) (Con): First, may I say how pleased I am that the Government are holding this debate on this important issue. I was delighted that during the general election campaign, on world poverty day, all three main parties used the chance to reiterate the importance of poverty reduction, and I was pleased to witness in the Chamber this morning the consolidation of that consensus between the shadow Chancellor and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Helping poorer countries and poorer people to escape from poverty is one of the most compelling challenges of modern times, particularly in the run-up to Britain's presidencies of the G8 and the European Union, and to the millennium review summit.

Our country is a rich one. As individuals and as a nation, we have a responsibility to assist others who live in poverty. We have always made a significant contribution to helping other countries across the world, as the Minister rightly said, and have earned widespread respect for the scale and quality of aid that we have given over many years. That has been the case under Governments of both Conservative and Labour colours. Indeed, the last Conservative Government led the world in providing debt relief for poorer countries. I hope that that will continue and that we can build on the consensus on international development issues.

The millennium review summit in September will highlight how far off track the developed world is from meeting the millennium development goals, but it is important that we recognise that there has been some progress towards meeting the targets in those goals. There are some encouraging statistics in the UN millennium project report. For example, between 1990 and 2002, average overall incomes increased by 21 per cent.; the number of people in extreme poverty declined by an estimated 130 million; child mortality rates fell from 103 to 88 deaths per 1,000 live births a year; life expectancy rose from 63 years to 65; an additional 8 per cent. of the world's people received access to water; and 15 per cent. acquired access to improved sanitation services.

However, there are still huge disparities in rates of progress. In Asia, rapid progress is being made. In Latin America, the middle east and north Africa, progress has been mixed. In sub-Saharan Africa, the situation remains severe: there is continuing food insecurity, a rise in extreme poverty, stunningly high child and maternal mortality, and many people live in slums and appalling accommodation.

The first target is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The proportion of undernourished people is falling slowly in most regions of the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, some countries have seen progress, but overall proportions of undernourishment remain high, with, sadly, little change.

The second target is to achieve universal primary education. In most regions, there has been progress in primary education, but, again, sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia are still significantly off track. Sadly, over 100 million children across the world still do not have access to or do not go to school.

The third target is the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Equality remains an unfulfilled goal, and the education parity target for 2005 will be missed in many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia.

The fourth target is the reduction of child mortality. Child mortality rates have generally declined, but progress has slowed in many regions, and reversals are being recorded. The mortality rate remains extremely high, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

The fifth target is the improvement of maternal health. Maternal mortality remains unacceptably high in every region, reflecting low public attention to women's needs and inadequate access to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

The sixth target is to combat HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases. HIV/AIDS affects at least 40 million people. It is pandemic in southern Africa and poses a serious threat, particularly to women and adolescents, in every developing region. Tuberculosis is on the rise in Africa and is a common co-infection with HIV/AIDS.

The seventh target is to ensure environmental sustainability. Over the past decade all developing regions have experienced substantial environmental degradation that could well worsen as a result of long-term, man-made, global climate change, and that issue must be addressed.

The eighth target is to ensure a global partnership for development. The global community is starting to head in the right direction, but the gap between rich and poor countries continues to widen. There is clearly much to be done if we are to achieve the millennium development goals. I trust that the millennium review summit will help to spur world leaders into honouring those promises and commitments made by 189 countries in 2000 as well as those made under the Monterrey consensus in 2002.

We all share a desire to achieve the goals by 2015, but at current rates of progress the goals will not be achieved for many decades; the Minister highlighted the fact that it will take approximately 130 years to achieve the education goals. Urgent action is required to make these ambitious goals a reality, and the UK has a significant and important role to play in that.

The Conservative party recognises the tragic scale of abject poverty across the developing world. Our long-term objective is to ensure that developing countries graduate from dependencies to fully functioning democracies with successful economies. Poor countries should be encouraged and enabled to create wealth and work their way out of poverty; to that end we should encourage free and fair trade, reduce EU tariff barriers and endeavour to ensure that the EU removes export subsidies. We recognise the importance of development

[Mark Simmonds]

aid, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where geographical, political and economic conditions are particularly challenging. That is why we are committed to giving more aid.

By applying Conservative principles to the aid that we give, we believe that we can achieve more for the developing world. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that UK bilateral aid has the potential to be more effective than some multilateral aid. We have stated that it is our intention to increase the Department for International Development's spending by £800 million over three years, taking it from £4.5 billion in 2005–06 to £5.3 billion in 2007–08. Measure for measure, those are exactly the same as the planned figures announced by the Government.

Like the Government, we are committed to working towards the 2013 UN target of spending 0.7 per cent. of national income on aid. The recent agreement by the EU 15 to achieve 0.51 per cent. by 2010 is certainly a welcome step, and I hope that that can be achieved. In 2003, the UK spent 0.34 per cent. of national income on aid. Total UK aid by 2007–08 is set to reach 0.47 per cent. of GDP. I should be grateful if the Minister would confirm whether the Government are still on track to meet that target.

It is clear that well spent aid works; the best example is the eradication of smallpox. British aid, in particular, has helped to immunise millions of children against polio. It supported Kenya's efforts to introduce free primary school education, helping 1.2 million children to get the schooling that they had been denied. Clearly, however, the quality of aid is just as important as the quantity.

We support the broad goals of campaigning organisations such as Make Poverty History and the Trade Justice Movement. They and their supporters around the country have succeeded in putting such issues right at the top of the political agenda. However, in the short to medium term there are a number of steps that the Government should be taking to work towards meeting the millennium development goals by 2015. The first issue is European Union aid, a subject highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). A quarter of DFID's budget is currently allocated through the EU. However, the EU is currently widely recognised as one of the least effective aid channels, as only 52 per cent. of EU overseas development aid goes to low-income countries. The Government should take firm and decisive action to ensure that the EU changes its allocation of aid, so that more is spent on low-income countries.

Secondly, we need to channel more aid through non-governmental organisations. There is increasing recognition within the international aid system of the role that can be played by NGOs such as the Red Cross and Save the Children, to give but two examples, given their commitment, energy, focus and, often, their speed of response. DFID spent only £223 million through NGOs in 2003—much of it on humanitarian aid. NGOs can also be effective in longer-term interventions that build poor countries' capabilities. We believe that DFID should increase the proportion of aid allocated through NGOs by actively seeking appropriate opportunities to use the NGO channel.

Thirdly, we need to implement stricter policy on governance requirements. Economic development stalls when Governments do not uphold the rule of law, pursue sound economic policy, make appropriate public investments, manage public administration, protect basic human rights and support civil society. Aid clearly works best where leaders exercise good governance. If a recipient fails to manage aid responsibly, it should be redirected through more effective channels such as NGOs.

Fourthly, there is the issue of aid distribution in lower income countries. Aid is most needed in lower income countries, but we must not forget that there is severe poverty in south America, the Caribbean and India. While it is right and proper, for obvious reasons, that sub-Saharan Africa is the main focus in the fight against poverty, we must not neglect our duties elsewhere in the world.

Fifthly, there must be freer and fairer trade. India and China are fine examples of poorer countries that have created their own wealth by working and trading their way out of poverty. Rapid economic growth lifted 500 million people out of poverty in those countries between 1981 and 2001; when poorer people are given the freedom to prosper, they do so. However, many changes must take place if developing countries are to benefit fully from trade. Protection for developed countries at the expense of the developing world must come to an end: it is both immoral and hypocritical. For every £1 that rich countries give to poorer countries in aid, those countries lose £2 due to our protectionist trade barriers. Trade must be made fairer by pressing the EU to allow poor countries to have tariff-free access to our markets, which would benefit British consumers and poorer producers.

The EU must reform the terms of the "Everything but Arms" agreement so that poor countries can reap all the benefits of access to the European market. Many developing countries still prefer the Cotonou criteria, which are more favourable than the more recent "Everything but Arms" agreements.

The common agricultural policy hurts British taxpayers and consumers and is detrimental to the interests of developing countries. It encourages over-production, distorts prices, imposes high tariffs on imports and subsidises export dumping in the developing world that is neither free nor fair. We believe that the multilateral, rules-based trading system overseen by the World Trade Organisation is vital for promoting trade, wealth creation and poverty reduction.

Debt relief is of key importance; we welcome the progress that has been made on bilateral debt relief and we support the principle of 100 per cent. cancellation of debts to multilateral institutions. Debts owed to the International Monetary Fund should be funded through the sale or revaluation of gold reserves. However, we must remain cautious. Some countries' debt repayments have actually risen thanks to debt cancellation, and responsible lending and borrowing is vital to ensure a sustainable end to the debt crisis. The international credit standing of recipient countries must not be compromised.

Finally, I want to put several issues to the Minister to ensure that he and his civil servants register that they should be debated and discussed at the summit. Many

nations and international institutions lack a coherent millennium development goal-based approach to reducing poverty: this must be addressed. In a vast number of countries with development programmes supported by the IMF since the adoption of those goals, there has been almost no discussion of whether the plans are consistent with the achievement of millennium development goals.

In its country-level advisory work, the UN millennium project has found that multilateral and bilateral institutions have not encouraged countries to take millennium development goals seriously as operational objectives. For instance, there is no established framework for differentiating support to countries with corrupt Governments from support to those that are weak but willing. Most development processes are stuck in the short-term. Development is a long-term process, but the key processes for international partnership are short-term in their orientation.

The international agencies, such as UNICEF for child health, are usually asked to focus on small pilot projects. In general, the technical UN agencies on the ground are not prepared to help countries scale up to national programmes. Multilateral agencies are not co-ordinating their support; multilateral organisations frequently compete for donor Government funding to implement small projects instead of supporting country-scale plans and budgets. In low-income countries, assistance levels are generally set more by donor preferences than by developing country needs.

Aid flows are also not growing as fast as promised. Even the much-heralded Monterrey commitments have not fully materialised. Developing countries wonder whether developed countries are genuinely committed to and serious about the goals.

Debt relief is not aligned with those goals. The targets for debt relief are based on arbitrary indicators, such as debt:export ratios, rather than millennium development goal-based needs. Many heavily indebted poor countries retain excessive debt owed to official creditors even after relief. Many middle-income countries are in a similar situation, and currently receive little or no debt relief.

We on this side of the House support the millennium development goals, but recognise that there is a significant amount of work to be done in facilitating their delivery. The Government will find us supportive of their efforts.

3.16 pm

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak from our Front Bench on this issue, so few days after being given this post.

Having listened to the Minister and the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds), it is clear that consensus will break out among the parties, although I do not say that there has not been consensus in the past. From all the material that I have read from my full in-tray, it is clear that, generally, there has not been a major disagreement over the priorities, principles and goals to be adopted in pursuing the eight millennium development goals with vigour, although there has been an exchange of views on the best way to achieve that outcome.

In view of the fact that I am only days into my new job, I tell myself that I should be listening and learning rather than pontificating too much. I am sure that the many others who wish to take part in this debate will be pleased to know that I intend to keep my remarks brief, so that they can be part of the telling from which I might learn.

I should also explain that I come to this debate in something of a time warp. I am a lifelong member of the World Development Movement and was an active campaigner through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, when I did not have the luxury of time to commit quite so much effort to it. Consequently, the discourse in which I have been involved started at Brundtland and ended at around the time of the Pergau dam. I therefore have a certain amount of space and time to fill to ensure that the various bits of the jigsaw are put in place so that I can see the full picture, which, I have to admit, I cannot yet see.

However, I will reflect on one point made by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness about the public commitment to the need for the achievement of the millennium development goals and to the campaign launched under the banner of Make Poverty History, which is supported by a large number of NGOs and which I hope will be very popular. From all the debates I have had in my constituency and elsewhere, I believe that we are talking to a public who appear to be schizophrenic on the issue. On the one hand, they will attend rock concerts in support of the need to draw attention to the urgent plight of and the problems of poverty in less-developed countries. On the other, when we start to look at the priorities for the UK Government, we hear, sometimes from the mouths of the same people, the phrase, "Charity begins at home." They put the full stop after the word "home", which means, in other words, that charity ends at home and that we do not need to look beyond our front door or garden gate. They say that we should meet our own concerns about domestic policy—for example, by getting our infrastructure and health service waiting lists right, rather than spending all this money on people beyond our shores whom we do not know.

The implication is that it is somehow acceptable in a Christian country to use that expression to mark the end of the debate, but I remember that it had a different meaning in sermons on how charity begins at home, which I listened to in the chapel in my constituency that I attended. The emphasis was not on the word "home", but on the word "begins". In other words, charity begins at home but does not end there. We must encourage people to recognise that, while we need to consider the problems that we face in this country, we should not be blind to the desperate concerns of those in less developed countries.

We all know about those problems as we are engaged in this debate in Westminster Hall, but I am sorry to say that we have not persuaded the vast majority of the general public that we should share a degree of responsibility for those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Many problems that we experience in this country are those of wealth: obesity, addictions and lager loutism, for example. Those are not the problems of poverty, although we should turn our attention to them as well, but, as responsible politicians, we also have an evangelising role beyond the Palace of

[Andrew George]

Westminster. This is a matter not just of going to summits and debating matters here, but of ensuring that we engage with NGOs and the media to get the message out that we have a shared responsibility.

The Minister drew our attention to the importance of the discussions at the UN summit in September in New York. He not only emphasised the need to deal with the eight goals, reflect on the excellent work of Professor Sachs and consider the fact that we will miss most of those goals by a wide margin unless we take urgent action, but addressed issues of governance and conflict resolution, which I believe are fundamental to achieving many of those direct goals.

The Make Poverty History campaign has brought together some of those goals in the three prongs of trade, debt and aid. As well as the summit in September, the forthcoming WTO round in December—which was mentioned earlier—and the UK's important responsibility in taking on the EU presidency in the coming six months, there are other significant milestones. If the G8 meeting at Gleneagles in early July achieves the goals that many of us would like it to achieve, it could set a strong and effective agenda for a productive UN summit in September.

Let me deal with the three issues. First, on trade, there is a strong debate between the free traders—the liberalisers—and those who argue for fair trade. I notice that the Government's attitude has warmed slightly, particularly on the economic partnership agreements, about which I asked the Secretary of State yesterday. There is concern that, through the EU and under those agreements, less developed countries might find themselves forced into accepting circumstances of liberalisation that might not necessarily be to their advantage. If the Secretary of State meant what he said—I have no reason to believe that he did not—I would like the Minister and his Department to ensure that, in future negotiations in Europe, less developed countries have a genuine choice as to whether they sign up to those agreements.

Mr. Drew: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a further potential barrier to all these discussions is the incoming president of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz? Even if Mr. Wolfowitz goes through a dramatic transformation and suddenly becomes much more interested in development issues than he appears to have been in the past, his reputation will not make those discussions any easier. Could not that be a problem?

Andrew George: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that I agree with him, because I signed his early-day motion on the subject in the last Parliament. I share the serious concerns on that front and it is important that neither the IMF nor, in particular, the World Bank put further pressure on less developed countries to liberalise their markets against their best interests. I entirely agree.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness commented that the common agricultural policy encourages over-production. We have yet to see the results of reform, although we hope to see them, but since the beginning of this year there should have been fewer incentives for over-production. I hope that this is successful, so that at least one element of the over-production and the potential for creating a climate in which there is significant dumping in less developed countries evaporates. Other aspects of CAP, such as the sugar regime, have yet to be resolved. In the debate on the future of the sugar regime, NGOs and British sugar interests are finding that they have a great deal more common ground, particularly in respect of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, which recognise that they have had the benefit of preferential agreements with EU member states, especially the UK. In any reform of the sugar regime, we need to work carefully through the transition from what we have now to what we should have, not prop up any sugar policy unnecessarily.

On debt and aid, like others I welcome the announcement made earlier this week. We are clearly going in the right direction, but we need greater evidence from the EU that it can effectively and sustainably eradicate poverty. That is where the emphasis should be in future. It has already been said today that a lot of aid programmes have succeeded in propping up corrupt regimes or siphoning off aid indirectly, so that those for whom the aid was intended did not benefit.

Underlying all this is a concern that we should not create through generous aid programmes a further problem, which is a culture of dependence in less developed countries. Aid programmes are important, but getting trading relationships right must be the top priority, so the Government must wield their muscle in the G8, the United Nations and, through the EU, the WTO ministerial conference in December.

3.30 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): I welcome the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) to his new job. If he despairs of adults in international development, he could do a lot worse than go into schools, where young people now have the benefit of a global dimension to their education, which means that there will be a big change in attitudes and a real understanding of the need to continue the commitment that he has outlined.

I welcome the debate and have a message for my hon. Friend the Minister: when he considers the millennium summit and the performance on the millennium development goals, he should consider the position of women. I say that not, at least in this case, because of feminist ideology, but because the MDGs on which there has been underperformance measure what happens to women. If the MDGs are to be achieved, female equality is probably the biggest single issue that must be tackled, and I shall largely focus on it.

We should welcome and celebrate the progress that has been made on achieving the MDGs and recognise the enormous amount of work, which is often carried out in adverse circumstances, that has taken place in some developing countries. The international community, and particularly the Labour Government, has turned some of the indicators around by reducing the number of people in poverty and providing universal primary education. It is also important to recognise that some countries and some areas not only are not improving, but are getting worse. The MDGs serve a great purpose as goals in their own right, and they are a

good way in which to understand some of the complexities of development, but it is important to consider the fine-grain detail to try to understand why things are going wrong and how we can put things right.

As has been said, the area that is doing least well and in which no MDGs will be met is sub-Saharan Africa, and I shall refer to one measure of underachievement there. To achieve some of the basic MDGs, it is assumed that countries will experience 7 per cent. economic growth, but none of the sub-Saharan countries has been able to sustain such growth year on year, and some such countries' economies are declining. However, I shall not focus on that matter because it is frequently discussed.

I want to examine the two MDGs on which there has been the least progress—maternal and infant mortality—and consider the measures that might be needed. Although they are separate MDGs, they go together because what happens to women and what happens to their children is fundamentally linked, for obvious reasons. To achieve the two MDGs, we must examine measures that deal with women, women's health and the health of young children.

I draw the Minister's attention to "The World Health Report 2005—Make every mother and child count". I am not sure whether he has seen it, but it is excellent. It starkly sets out some of the difficulties and costs borne by women and children in developing countries. Page 10 contains the figures, which I am sure that the Minister will consider, on the enormous increase in maternal mortality rates in Africa, and the report points out similar problems in eastern Europe. The report states:

> "Pregnancy and childbirth ... are ... the leading causes of death, disease and disability among women of reproductive age in developing countries".

It gives the startling statistic that out of more than 500,000 women who die each year as a result of pregnancy and childbirth, fewer than 1 per cent. are from developed countries and more than 99 per cent. are from developing countries.

Let us consider the kind of measures that are needed to start to turn those figures around. Complex strategies are needed to overcome the complex issues that affect such tragedies. Such issues include the need to train staff and keep them in-country—we all know about the problems resulting from the haemorrhage of trained staff from sub-Saharan Africa.

Difficult interventions are required, particularly in the case of acute problems in childbirth, where quite expensive facilities and services, which the countries concerned do not have the resources to provide, are needed. Even if facilities exist, women are often not taken into hospitals or centres in which they can have their children safely, in many cases because their husbands will not allow it.

I saw the consequences of the problems involved in providing proper care for pregnant women and women in childbirth when I visited southern Sudan. I was introduced to some birth attendants who had been properly trained and equipped by a NGO. Everything seemed to be working fine, although they did not have a hospital. Because there were no buildings, they did not have anywhere to store their equipment, and all they had left was one little drum to put on a woman's stomach to listen to a baby's heartbeat. That was all the equipment that they had left a couple of years after money had been spent on training and equipping them. That is a harsh reminder of the environment in which birth attendants work and the effort that will be required to scale up services to ensure that women get proper maternity and obstetric care.

High mortality rates for the under-fives are linked to high maternal mortality rates, and, again, we need to understand why that should be. The issues include changing social trends in developing countries, the care of newborns, weaning and the care of the older children.

I want to highlight the MDG on HIV/AIDS and other diseases because of its impact on women. We often assume that HIV/AIDS, TB and other illnesses are gender neutral, but most authorities say that that is not the case. For example, the UN representative who discussed HIV/AIDS and children at a recent meeting in London highlighted the fact that gender is one of the dominant issues when it comes to tackling HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. HIV/AIDS is responsible for some of the worst trends in maternal mortality and, because of the close relationship between women and children, it also has a strong bearing on what happens to babies and children. Indeed, a doctor at Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital in Soweto told me that the death of the mother predicts the failure of the child.

As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, I am particularly concerned about orphans and vulnerable children. World Vision UK, which the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) highlighted the other day, has set out some of the telling factors that result from children being orphaned at an early age. Its work shows that 90 per cent. of orphans and vulnerable children do not have proper food compared with about 10 per cent. of other children. If one talks to some of the local civil society organisations that operate in sub-Saharan Africa, one finds that community feeding schemes that provide basic food are fundamental to such children's well-being. When my hon. Friend the Minister examines how to improve the prospects for orphans and vulnerable children, he should consider supporting some of those schemes and providing low-level financing for community feeding to ensure that such children are kept alive and have a reasonable prospect of growing into functioning adults.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that many orphans are victims of war and that unless there is a comprehensive system to support them in local communities, they end up fleeing to one of the African capital cities, where they end up as victims of crime, drugs and all the other abuses of young people? We must ensure that local systems of support are implemented rather than waiting for those orphans to become street children in a capital city.

Ms Keeble: My hon. Friend is right. The number of orphans and vulnerable children in sub-Saharan Africa has been huge for a long time. If hon. Members examine the figures, HIV/AIDS has roughly doubled the number of orphans and vulnerable children, turning a manageable problem into what has been described as a brick wall that Africa is heading towards. The issue is whether the countries concerned can deal with the scale of the problem.

The orphans and vulnerable children who are victims of the spread of HIV/AIDS are part of a hidden tragedy. We tend to focus on the illness and the need for medical

[Ms Keeble]

responses rather than considering the consequences, of which OVCs are probably the most significant. I take my hon. Friend's point that orphans and Africa is a major issue, and there are a number of different causes that require urgent attention and intervention. Although we all understand the importance of children, they do not have votes and voices, and they are often last in the pecking order when it comes to allocating funds for services.

Many other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall conclude. In preparing for the summit, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will examine some of the factors that I have mentioned, in particular the fact that poverty and disease in the developing world often have a female face. If those issues are to be tackled fully, the gender dimensions of the situation must be understood and dealt with.

When we examine the MDGs, we should focus on which are failing to be met and why that should be. When we increase aid to the developing world, we should direct it at the areas in which the MDGs are not being met. The money should deal not only with the big strategic issues, but with the complex issues of providing proper health care for women and ensuring that infant mortality is also addressed.

We should ensure that attention is paid to ensuring that reproductive health issues are tackled so that women can take some control over their lives and experience proper birth spacing—the UN has some difficulties with that subject, particularly because of the United States' position. That would allow different ways of tackling HIV/AIDS to be implemented without our hearing quite so much about how abstinence is the sole answer. When we celebrate the achievement of the MDGs—I am sure that we will—we should ensure that we have achieved them all and that we have not left little pockets in which sections of the community continue to suffer and pay the price of poverty.

3.46 pm

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): The United Nations was, of course, set up in 1945 as the chief agent of collective security. It is perhaps salutary to recall that it was only four years ago that it was described in the United Nations millennium declaration as

"the indispensable common house of the entire human family".

It is also only fair in the circumstances to record that many people and countries around the world will conclude that, due to errors of omission or commission on the part of the United Nations, that common house is short of bedrooms and other floor space for suffering peoples.

If I do not make the next point it will certainly be made to me. I am conscious of the truism that the United Nations is as good and effective only as the sum total commitment of its individual members. My purpose is not to slate the United Nations for the sake of it. That will not greatly advance matters. It is the apex of the multilateral machinery that we have at our disposal and I—in common, I suspect, with most colleagues from the different political parties in the House—respect it, believe that it has a contribution to make and want to see it strengthened. In short, I am not a narrow nationalist or an impatient isolationist. I am an internationalist and believe in the potential of the United Nations as an organisation. However, it is as well to look at some of the commitments made in the millennium declaration and to take stock of where we now are. Inevitably, it will be a selective choice given rather fleeting attention.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: I want to intervene before the hon. Gentleman gets into the body of his speech to refer back to his intervention on me, when I said that I was not aware of particular accusations. The Department is aware of accusations, although whether they are the particular accusations to which the hon. Gentleman was referring, I have no idea. I repeat my offer to discuss that with him afterwards.

John Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister. We could have a conversation across the Chamber now. Some people might think that that would guarantee that it was a closely guarded secret, but I cannot be certain that it would. I should like to take advantage of the Minister's offer and discuss that particular matter at a later stage—perhaps at the conclusion of the debate.

The millennium declaration states:

"We will spare no effort to free our peoples from the scourge of war, whether within or between States".

That is what the signatories profess; but of course, to be brutally candid, it is not true. It is not correct to say that the signatories have spared no effort. Let us give just one example—the continuing crisis in Darfur. Too little money has been devoted, too little thought has been given and too little logistical back-up has been provided. There is a lack of political will, which has been, and continues to be, a major obstacle to the achievement of peace in Darfur.

We know also that the massive oil interests that China has in Sudan have prevented concrete measures from being taken. My view—which I have frequently articulated and should like to reiterate—is that what we need, quite apart from a robust sanctions policy against the Government of Sudan pending the achievement of peace in Darfur, is a peace enforcement mandate for Darfur. We need a dramatically increased African Union presence—if an African Union presence it is to be—and a blue-helmeted force, with all the financial backing that would thereby flow from the United Nations.

Peter Luff (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the remarkable work that he has done in highlighting the issue consistently in recent months. I can bring him some moderately good news. I understand that the African Union today tabled a request for the equivalent of £252 million of aid, of which by lunchtime some £110 million had been pledged by donor countries to assist the union in its peacekeeping work. Something good is beginning to happen, and I hope that the other £142 million will follow.

John Bercow: That is extremely good news and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being the bearer of glad tidings. Progress has been incredibly slow. Let us be clear about what we have witnessed and what we know

continues to happen in Darfur— aerial bombardment, mass shootings, widespread rape, theft of livestock and destruction of crops. They are all part of the cocktail of barbarity that is visited on the long-suffering people of Darfur on a daily basis. It has to stop. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 35,000 people a month are losing their lives. The reality is that, for all the world has said, it has not cared that much about the serial slaughter of black Africans in Darfur. The world may say that it cares, but it has not done so in the only way that matters, which is practical.

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis or with what he said about the need for an African force and about the abominable behaviour of the forces that are killing so many people. Does he accept that in the long term a peace settlement would have to consider the people who have migrated to the region because of environmental destruction in other parts of Sudan? We must consider the pressure on resources if we are to bring about a wider peace. The conflict is, in part, one of many environmental wars in Africa.

John Bercow: I accept that that is a relevant consideration. Another important part of the equation is consideration of the rights of people who have moved away from Darfur and in the process found that their land has been stolen. That is a big factor, but I certainly accept what the hon. Gentleman says and do not think that there is a cigarette paper between us on the matter.

Ms Keeble: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that his points tie up with those that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) made about the need to consider conflict areas carefully and not assume that we cannot provide assistance, and the need to prepare for peace much earlier? That can help to stabilise situations such as the one that the hon. Gentleman describes.

John Bercow: I would not want to take an absolutist view on the matter, but there might be some difference between the hon. Lady and me. The reason is that the Government, it seems to me, have a fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayer. We must be careful about committing substantial sums of money in development assistance—as opposed to humanitarian aid—to countries where there is not even a peace agreement or a basic framework for civilised relationships. However, I would not want to rule the idea out in all circumstances. There may be particular projects that we could support. The Government should be prepared to consider them, but it would be wrong to suppose that the Government could in all conscience commit huge sums of money to development assistance to forestall a continuation of violence or, better still, to prepare the ground for a substantial peace, simply on an "I hope" basis. The British taxpayer is entitled to expect something a bit more solid and concrete before major resources are committed. I am glad that the issue has excited some response.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab) *rose—*

John Bercow: I would like to make some progress on other points, as I know that other hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate, but how can I resist the exhortations of the hon. Lady?

Ms Taylor: I am most grateful. I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman with great care. He is saying things that, sadly, I have had seriously to think about when considering the UN's peacekeeping competence in the Balkans. NATO had to be deployed after what were, quite frankly, horrendous murders and tyrannies.

Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting to the House that the United Nations peacekeeping forces are well past their sell-by date—that they have become less and less valuable—in dealing with corrupt regimes such as the one in Sudan, and that the UN will seriously have to consider a model that is more similar to NATO's if we are to achieve the kind of peace that is necessary if aid is to work in any way, shape or form?

John Bercow: We must think boldly about the sort of approach that is required in places such as Darfur. The word "peacekeeping" is a misnomer, as peace does not exist in any material sense in Darfur. We should not play semantic games or use easy terms such as "peacekeeping", which does not reflect the reality on the ground that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) and I encountered on our recent trip to Darfur or that I witnessed for myself during my first visit in July last year. It would seem more sensible to recognise that peace does not exist, to decide whether it falls within the ambit and responsibility of the UN to seek to ensure that it does, and, if we decide positively on the latter, to try to give effect to peace—the result that we seek—through a peace enforcement mandate with the blue helmets and the resources of the UN.

The millennium declaration also states:

"We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty".

To be candid, the reality is that that has not happened and is not happening. Member states are not contributing the scale of resources that would allow for fulfilment of the millennium development goals by 2015 or any time near that date. A ratcheting-up of resources is certainly needed. As that is common ground, I shall not focus on it any further.

I believe that we all agree that, irrespective of the determination of Governments to commit resources through aid, a bigger element of the equation in improving the life chances of people in developing countries will always be trade. Trade is massively bigger than aid could ever be. We may have different views about fair trade versus free trade, but we can confidently say that developing countries are unfairly denied access to western markets on the basis of alleged anxieties on our part about health and safety. The reality is often that that is simply a smokescreen for continuing self-interest and protectionism.

Similarly, we can safely say that, more often than not, the trade that takes place is not free trade. It is heavily subsidised to the advantage of the European Union and the United States, which is why I endorse the call made by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds) to make progress towards a successful conclusion of the Doha development round, which must involve a massive and speedy reduction in trade-distorting agriculture subsidies for western agricultural production. The hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) and I debated that

[John Bercow]

very point on the Floor of the House only a few days ago. I do not know how it will be possible to persuade rich and articulate defenders of self-interest in the United States to change their ways, and it will not be any easier to do that within the European Union, but we must abandon the guff; the hypocrisy is too stomach-churning to continue with any longer.

If we do not want to achieve a dramatic improvement in the fortunes of poor people, we ought to be honest enough to say so. We should acknowledge that keeping our living standards just as they are and placating professional and powerful political lobbies in our own democracies is more important to us. I hope that that is not true, but it simply does not wash to say that we want to improve the opportunities for poor people in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, and then to fail to adopt the measures required to achieve that purpose.

Ms Keeble: I do not want to delay the hon. Gentleman's speech for too long, but I would like him to address an issue that is a serious problem for his party; it is not so much of a problem for my party. In addition to policies that promote growth, there must be policies to redistribute wealth. China has the fastest growing economy in the world, but it also has among the highest numbers of poor people. It cannot tackle that poverty because it has a complete dearth of redistribution policies. This subject is not just about trade and economic growth; it is also about redistribution and good social policies, and members of my party, as socialists, understand that.

John Bercow: I certainly agree that countries need good social policies, but we should be realistic about our ambitions. There are certain things that we can expect to do in the short term—or even the medium term. I do not honestly think it is realistic for our country, the European Union or the United States to seek to tell countries whose performance is already improving exactly what scale of redistributive policy they should adopt. Yes, they should use increased resources to develop decent systems of social services, and they should have methods of ensuring that the poorest people in their countries are able to get their feet on the ladder of commercial opportunity and educational advance, but I am cautious about setting out too many specific and high-falutin' goals which we might not be able to attain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness referred to the importance of the MDGs and the Conservative party's support for them. I respect what he said, and I agree with it. However, all of us also know that those goals have proved to be very ambitious, and that they go far beyond the scope of the existing, and rather unsatisfactory, policy commitments that nations have made.

I respect the point made by the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), but it would be good if we could learn to walk effectively before seeking to sprint. We are not even walking very effectively at present, and I am therefore a little reluctant to be tempted down the utopian path that the hon. Lady wishes me to tread with her.

Jeremy Corbyn *rose—*

John Bercow: I am tempted to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I think that if I do so I shall be even more unpopular with my colleagues than I have already managed to become. I may give way to him shortly, if he behaves well for the next five minutes.

Jeremy Corbyn: What I wish to say is part of the point that the hon. Gentleman is making.

John Bercow: Oh, very well.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am trying to help the hon. Gentleman along the road to utopia and social justice; I know that he is searching for that road, and I want to help him. He is anxious not to make over-prescriptive demands on poor countries, and I understand where he is coming from on that, but does he accept that many British, European and north American companies are making incredibly large profits out of investing in very low-wage—indeed, slave-labour—economies in the far east, and that we need a much tougher International Labour Organisation that can improve the living standards of the poorest workers in the poorest industrialised countries in the world?

John Bercow: I am very sceptical about that; it sounds to me like a model for grossly increased regulation. If there were to be a body charged with the task of devising the most burdensome and onerous set of regulations known to mankind, I cannot think of anyone more appropriately qualified to be at its apex than the hon. Gentleman. To make business more uncompetitive, to increase the load of regulation, to stifle competitive endeavour, and to encourage an effectively Marxist ethos as far across the world as possible, would, of course, be the daily joy of the hon. Gentleman. I do not myself think that it would advance the interests of the poorest people in the world.

I believe that globalisation is, on the whole, a great force for good. It is also pretty well inevitable. Whereas the hon. Gentleman, whose knowledge and integrity I massively respect, is probably hostile to much of that phenomenon, I think that it has, on the whole, been a good thing. If we look, for example, at countries such as Vietnam, where there has been a dramatic improvement in living standards and economic growth over the past 15 years or so, we see the impact of companies such as Nike. There will be those who say, "Oh no, they're capitalists. They're exploitative. They're bad guys. We don't approve of them. They must be regulated. They should be trodden on. They shouldn't be allowed to behave in that way." But I do not agree. Paying someone $54 a month to work in a Nike factory might not sound very good to us or to the professional salariat of western non-governmental organisations, but it is a damn sight better deal than somebody in Vietnam would get if they toiled away for 14 hours a day in a rice field. We have to operate within the framework of the country whose interests we are considering.

The millennium declaration says:

"We will support the consolidation of democracy in Africa and assist Africans in their struggle for lasting peace, poverty eradication and sustainable development, thereby bringing Africa into the mainstream of the world economy."

In essence, that raises an issue of governance. Without labouring the point, I simply remind the Minister in a constructive but robust way that those aims have not been met in relation, for example, to Zimbabwe. We have historical obligations, and the international community has burked those obligations in relation to Zimbabwe. There has been no serious attempt to ensure better governance, and I appeal to the Minister, and in particular to Foreign Office Ministers, to redouble their efforts to persuade the South African Government to recognise their responsibilities to bring about a step change in the behaviour of that despotic regime.

On the subject of human rights, which the hon. Member for Islington, North and I have debated previously on the Floor of this Chamber, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has a much better idea for improving the UN's human rights machinery than does the high-level panel. The panel does very good work and correctly diagnosed the weaknesses of the United Nation Commission on Human Rights, but it flunked the opportunity to make a satisfactory proposal for reform. As the hon. Gentleman will recall, it suggested that membership of the Commission should be made universal—after its analysis had demonstrated that there were consistent breaches of human rights by member states. It acknowledged that the organisation had variously been chaired by Nepal—not a noted supporter of human rights and democratic pluralism—and by Libya, and that it is, indeed, currently being chaired by Indonesia. Yet, after all that, it said that membership should be made universal. The problem is the automaticity of membership and the Buggins's turn criterion for chairmanship. That should change, and the Secretary-General is right to suggest that there should be a smaller human rights council, membership of which should be determined by behaviour, not geography. That would be a tremendous improvement, which I hope that colleagues could support.

There is much to do. I have had an opportunity to focus on some of the themes, eloquently aided and abetted by several hon. Members, who have made helpful interventions. I support some of the work that the Government are doing. The United Nations has a future, but it must tackle its own internal problems. If it is to have credibility in talking, for example, about the millennium development goals in respect of women, it clearly must do something to counter the welter of accusations about the maltreatment and sexual harassment of its own staff.

There is work to be done. The only beneficiaries of a weakened or, worse still, eliminated United Nations would be the most powerful people in the world, who do not really favour any collective machinery. If we are united in this Chamber in believing that there is an important role for a multilateral organisation committed to collective security, the advancement of human rights and the extension of opportunity to the poorest and most disadvantaged people in the world, we should unite in trying to find ways forward for an organisation that has good intent, but which, in recent years, has sadly lost its way.

4.10 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), who is always thoroughly challenging. He provokes, with some determination, and I know he believes that through argument we will ultimately reach the reality of responses that, we hope, can deliver change. I must be careful about how I respond to him, as he once developed a relationship with my daughter, who I always hoped would be a strong Labour party member. She came away from a discussion with him believing that he had integrity and enthusiasm.

Ms Keeble: What did you do to her?

Ms Taylor: I locked her up. I decided that that was probably most appropriate at the time. However, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman. Of course, I agree with some of what he said to the House today, although most certainly not with it all, but I appreciate that we are here to think. Sometimes, thinking outside the box is the most difficult thing for us all, but it is essential that it should be done.

Rarely has a campaign produced as much commitment, debate, determination, eagerness to deliver and demand as that surrounding the millennium goals. If my constituency experience is anything to go by, that series of intentions to deliver is something that I will not be allowed to forget, as my constituents will ensure that I focus on it. They will not let me take my eye off it, and will question me again and again about delivery.

Not just one group of people are involved in that, as all people, old and young, are keen to have an input to the debate. The united churches in my constituency—people whom, on the whole, I see as incredibly tolerant—become demanding and angry when they discuss the millennium goals. I receive an avalanche of letters from them, and cards that make demands. I believe that those involved employ lobbying techniques that the best commercial enterprises would do well to follow—they are so good at delivering their punches.

The detailed knowledge of those people is inspiring. They know what the Chancellor and the Department for International Development have said. They remind me about that, and they maintain their focus. Unlike the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), I think that a gutsy approach is being taken to the millennium goals and that there is a serious determination that they should be achieved.

I want to refer to a statement made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), who spoke of an increasingly global dimension in education, which is very focused on presenting statements about the needs of others around the world. She said that this is changing attitudes. I think she is absolutely right.

In the past 18 months, I have visited five different primary schools—there could have been five more, but my diary gets chock full, like everyone's, so they could not be fitted in—and in all of them the young students were keen to ask me how the millennium goals would be delivered. One group was so insistent and persistent that I invited them down and they had 30 minutes with the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The people who are interested in such matters are seriously intolerant of our lack of action, determination and enthusiasm. They make it quite clear to me that we must emphasise in particular the fact that unless there is clean running water and sanitation, the opportunity for

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children to attend primary school will not exist. They look with disdain and disgust on the fact that—as a world and as a country—we are so wealthy, yet we cannot even deliver clean water and sanitation facilities from which children can benefit. Their disdain is appropriate, and we should be taking further and serious action, although I am talking about not only Great Britain.

I am keen to say that schools do not just talk; they act. WaterAid has been the focus of attention at the schools I have visited, and I have received more than one donation from those youngsters and given it to WaterAid. Northumbrian Water in my patch holds that charity very dear, so I ensure that donations reach the appropriate people. The children then ask how the money is being spent. Like good accountants, they want to see a full list of the delivery factors. As politicians, we must listen to those youngsters. They are our voting public of the future. If their integrity is to be matched by our action, we must up our stakes.

I know of a school where the head teacher and the children have a relationship with Aynssi Yina, a school in Ghana. That relationship is not carried out by e-mail, because that is not possible, so the children write and the children from Ghana write back. The head teacher from Great Britain has visited the school in Ghana and the head teacher from that school has visited here. Both share their views on how best to deliver. It really is incredibly gratifying to see that young people are doing what they can do best: they aim at the local element and work with it to deliver.

When I was in India, children who lived in the countryside attended school in tin sheds. It was their school. They sat on the floor and used chalk boards. There were 40 or 50 children in a room, and when it rained they could not hear themselves breathing because of the noise on the tin roof. They were there, delivering.

Three schools in my constituency—one Catholic, one Church of England and one with no denomination—have delivered a profoundly valuable relationship with those children. When we consider the millennium goals and say that they are the responsibility of others such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the G8 and so on, the children say, "Hold on, it's our responsibility to deliver. Let's be focused about how we have an input to the argument." That is so profoundly valuable.

That is enough about schools for the moment. I want to end my remarks by speaking about India and about us and local matters. We have spent a small amount in investment in a small part of India—£4 million. The local people spent that money to ensure that their drains were sunk and that water taps were provided. Given that we are in the 21st century, I felt thoroughly ashamed when a lady told me that she had a chimney in the room where she cooks and that it ensures that her children do not have runny eyes and that their chest problems are significantly less. That shows how small items can deliver enormous good health and hope.

That lady said that she had one sewing machine, that members of the family could read and that the girls were attending school—what a joy! My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North was right when she said that the girl in the family invariably has to support her mother in the domestic duties. The kit may be very small, but it delivers enormously in my terms.

In India, I met the Self Employed Womens Association—a small group of women who were positively invigorating. I was so pleased to meet them. They said that they had obtained a small Government grant, set up their own bank and paid their grant back, owing no one. They had set up their own small agricultural enterprise, growing plants and food, and had a market stall. They were using their talents and making household furnishings. The women and their families read; their small rural communities felt included.

The pieces of kit that I am speaking about are incredibly small. I am talking about not the millennium goals, the 100 million children who do not receive an education or the fact that we are spending billions, but the very small bits of kit that are making a significant difference to people's lives.

SEWA asked, "Dari, why do you all operate such protectionist mechanisms that prevent our trade from being successful and why, when our goods are sold anywhere, even under fair trade regulations, do we get so little money back compared with what the goods were sold for?" We are a shabby lot. There is so much that we could do without much effort.

The debate is incredibly important. I do, of course, support the millennium goals. I want my Government to deliver, I want our country to deliver and I want the international community to be in on this. But sometimes we must realise that, however many good intentions we have, we might wait for ever if we rely on others to accept their moral responsibilities. Perhaps we should focus on the smaller projects and use them to deliver for communities that desperately need them to be delivered effectively.

I found it difficult to agree with everything that the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St. Ives, said about the private utilities. I know that Northumbrian Water has provided its expertise and competence for nothing through WaterAid because that is its chosen charity and its way of giving. We must understand that private utilities do some amazingly good work around the world, and that it is wrong to suggest that they are all operating on the same basis for profit and to reduce the impact of what they are doing in these countries.

Corrupt regimes must be sorted out. I followed the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Buckingham very keenly. I have been criticised a great deal for the fact that I voted for our troops to be deployed in Iraq. Perhaps I should take care when I say this to the House, but when I see people wringing their hands over Darfur and asking what on earth we should do when a tyrant is ripping his country to pieces, I am very tempted to say that it is time to give the United Nations the muscle that it deserves.

John Bercow: I entirely agree with the thrust of what the hon. Lady has just said. Does she agree that there is also the major problem of despicable and barbaric regimes that are not the subject of regular or prominent news coverage? It is immensely important that we do not become or seem to be indifferent to them. The example

that springs to mind is that of Burma, which is subject to a brutal military dictatorship, but has not been on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council. Nor has it been the subject of a single oral statement in this House since records began.

Ms Taylor: I listened keenly to the hon. Gentleman, and I totally agree with much of what he said. There are such tyrants who regularly seem invisible, and their peoples are emasculated as a consequence. It is no good us wringing our hands. We should give the UN Security Council the tools to do the job, and we know that that will be difficult in terms of force size, command structure and how forces are deployed.

We know that there are problems but, my goodness me, to reduce the importance of the United Nations in the way we have over the years in the glorious hope that it could deliver does less for the UN—in fact, it undermines it—while allowing tyrants to have their own way in their countries in the most corrupt manner.

I am keen to return to the millennium goals. My hon. Friend the Minister introduced the subject with gusto, commitment and integrity. I want him to know that I want the millennium goals to work. I am distraught that we are already floundering on the goal of getting children into primary school education, especially girls, but it is inevitable that we will flounder. This is not a straight track and delivery is not easy. I am delighted, however, that even though the mountain is a difficult one to climb, we have put our boots on and begun to make tracks.

4.27 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): The hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) is absolutely right to focus on the interconnectedness of the world and on what we can all do in our constituencies and in our local schools, as well as on the bigger picture.

There will be three key summits during this critical year for Africa and the developing world: the UN millennium review summit in New York this September, the G8 summit in Gleneagles in July and the World Trade Organisation conference in Hong Kong in December. Each summit shares the same aim: to meet the millennium goals and to halve world poverty. If such a reminder were needed, on every day of every summit 30,000 children will die in Africa.

Ahead of the G8 summit, a powerful advert is being broadcast by the Make Poverty History campaign. It shows various celebrities clicking fingers reflecting how every second, as someone snaps their fingers, a child dies in the developing countries. In France, the actress Kristin Scott Thomas clicks her fingers, while in Germany, Claudia Schiffer clicks hers. It is reputed that even the Chancellor is clicking his fingers here, between meetings. It tellingly emphasises just how many children die in Africa at any time.

By the time the Prime Minister hosts the G8 summit at Gleneagles in just over 40 days, Make Poverty History believes that 10 million Britons will be supporting the call for increased aid, debt relief and trade justice. Hopefully, it will get that support, but how do we get the support of the United States? All of us in this House support more aid, less debt and better trade. There may be differences on the details of the effectiveness of aid expenditure and other things; it was good to hear the hon. Lady extolling the virtues of water privatisation. There may be differences on the balance between free and fair trade, or on the future of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative.

However, if a television presenter gave us just a second—a click of the fingers—to say whether we wanted to make poverty history at Gleneagles, we would all say yes. But making poverty history will not be achieved by one Prime Minister, one country or any one G8 member. Making poverty history will only be achieved collectively at Gleneagles, and during the next 40 days the Government have to ensure that Ministers in the US, Germany and Japan are also metaphorically clicking their fingers.

During the next 40 days, the Prime Minister will set off on what has been termed a global mission for Africa, which I understand will be starting tomorrow with a trip to Rome for talks with the Italian Prime Minister; then he will see President Putin, President Bush in June, and will finish by visiting President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder. Heading the topics to be discussed is the Chancellor of the Exchequer's project for the international finance facility, in which he has correctly and wisely invested so much political credit.

The IFF is a good idea and, importantly, it is probably the best idea on the table. It has the biggest chance of raising the missing $50 billion that is needed to ensure that the millennium goals become a reality. That sum was identified as necessary several years ago by the Zedillo report, but little progress has been made collectively on that, including on the allocation of 0.7 per cent. of gross national product to overseas development. There are concerns among some NGOs about the IFF—on the payback period, the level of aid after 2015 and the governance structures—and for some the issues are more important than the front-loading benefit of the international finance facility. However, all hon. Members probably see that if we do not get that front-loading, we will never get the momentum that will ensure that the millennium goals are achieved.

Therefore, the Prime Minister's breakneck tour of G8 leaders is primarily to get some breakthrough on the Chancellor's IFF initiative. Much of the focus for attention has been on the United States. Ever since that speech to the Federal Reserve, the United States Administration's response to the IFF has not moved much beyond one Treasury Under-Secretary's statement that:

> "It's not so much that we oppose the British using the IFF, or others, but it does not work for the US because we have means of providing support fot poor countries that is working for us."

The frustration is that we do not see the United States coming on board as a team player. If anything, that view is becoming more entrenched. There will be progress at the G8 summit only if there is progress on the volumes of aid—and there will be progress on that only if the United States is on board. Sadly, it is apparent that the United States is resistant to calls for general increases in aid.

From Senators to Members of Congress, there seems to be deep suspicion in Washington of what it sees as simply throwing money at developing countries without any accompanying strict controls on where it is spent. Washington, as we know from the millennium challenge

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account, likes aid to be ring-fenced and likes to say that it is for an AIDS project, or an education project. The Bush presidency, which in fairness has been far more supportive of Africa than many had anticipated, has its own pet projects that, sadly, do not include the IFF. There will be progress on the G8 communiqué, but without the United States the IFF looks increasingly unlikely to be part of that.

I suspect that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have been harbouring greater hopes for the IFF with their European neighbours and it looks like European Union countries will back it. President Chirac seems to be firmly behind the IFF, and within the European Union it is mostly Scandinavian countries—the ones that already meet the 0.7 per cent.—that clearly back the plan. However, we need to be confident that Italy and Germany will also support the IFF.

I hope that the movement towards 0.7 per cent. that we have seen in the European Union this week—although that figure by 2030, 2040 or 2015 will not exactly help us to meet the millennium development goals—will mean that the United States will feel more pressure to back measures at the G8, because it will see that the EU is at least united on this issue and determined to move things forward.

Given this background, one of the most important meetings will not include the Prime Minister: the meeting of the G8 Finance Ministers on 10 and 11 June. Also, European Union Finance Ministers are due to meet on 7 June to discuss the idea of a voluntary levy on air travel as a way of financing development aid. The fuel tax proposal was first floated by the French and is supported by the Germans. It would help fund another IFF, the international finance facility for immunisation, which will work by issuing bonds to raise cash to buy vaccines. That mini-IFF could be seen as a pilot for the Chancellor's project and the IFF proper. Mid-June will therefore be crucial. If EU Finance Ministers do not agree to that mini-IFF, it is unlikely that, three days later, the G8 Finance Ministers will start agreeing the IFF proper.

No doubt the Chancellor remains hopeful that the Europeans will agree their own plans to sell bonds in order to send cheap drugs to poor countries. No doubt he remains hopeful that before Gleneagles he and other Finance Ministers will agree on such important issues as relief on multilateral debts, reflecting the UK's own bilateral schemes with certain African countries. There might even be some movement on gold sales.

It is even possible that the prospects for the IFF may have been further reduced by the EU's announcement of aid levels this week. The EU's commitment to doubling its aid package, with at least half going to African countries, is of course a major breakthrough; it means an extra £14 billion every year within just five years. It means the wealthiest 15 EU countries spending at least 0.5 per cent. of national income on overseas aid, with the UK and France reaching 0.7 per cent. by 2013. That is extremely good news, but it may also mean that there is less income at the disposal of EU leaders and Finance Ministers to commit to financing other key measures. It is, after all, a commitment by the EU. We are talking not about the key measures at Gleneagles, but the millennium review summit itself. The commitment was not mentioned by any EU leader or by any newspaper outside the UK in association with the G8, offering little momentum on prospects for the G8.

What are the other key recommendations of the 900-page report by the Commission for Africa? I expect 90 per cent. of the commission's comprehensive and commendable report to be taken to the G8 summit. Several key recommendations deserve strong support, but the challenge comes from the fact that not all of the recommendations will work well for all G8 members. The UK Government clearly need different strategies for each of the other seven countries. In particular, they need a strategy for the United States.

There is an undeniable moral authority around children, and half the continent of Africa is populated by children. Poverty in Africa will not be broken unless there is a fundamental investment in health and education for Africa's children. A message about investment in children therefore works well in the United States. There was a breakthrough on HIV/AIDS in the United States when it took on board the fact of mother to child transmission. The message is one of 1 million extra doctors and nurses by 2015 and of $5 billion extra over the next decade for colleges and universities.

Doubtless, we will need a different message for Japan, Italy and Germany; we need different strategies for the other seven countries of the G8 if there is to be success at Gleneagles. But at the end of the day I suspect that whether Gleneagles is a success will depend on how far the Prime Minister pushes his views, as opposed to accepting some minimal compromise on US terms to avoid an open split at the summit.

Any split at Gleneagles will make progress at the millennium summit review this September almost impossible. The Sachs report, on which the millennium summit review will be based, presents big ideas for making poverty history. To make that big idea a reality there must be a big tent, with the G8 leaders backing the report with further funds. Perhaps it would be possible for the UK Government to resurrect the IFF as a UN project in New York if it frustratingly fails to meet approval at the G8.

Gleneagles cannot be allowed to fail. Clearly the G8 communiqué must be more ambitious than "first do no harm". With an agenda of summits at New York and then Hong Kong, straining relations is exactly what the Prime Minister cannot afford to do, yet Africa cannot afford to wait any longer. Gleneagles will be not just about clicking fingers but about crossing them. Over the next 40 days, we in this House have to give some thought to what we can do to ensure that our colleagues in the United States and elsewhere in the world recognise the considerable importance that we attach to these various summits. It is pointless us simply having discussions and debates in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber unless we can carry parliamentarians across the world with us.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. We are now in the last hour. If the Minister is to reply, he will need about 10 minutes at the end, so I should be grateful if Members would bear that in mind when making their contributions.

4.40 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. O'Hara. How much time do you judge that we should each have?

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): I shall leave hon. Members to use their discretion as to how they use the time, bearing it in mind that three hon. Members wish to contribute.

Jeremy Corbyn: Now we know the sum. Thank you, Mr. O'Hara. I shall be brief, because I think everybody ought to be able to speak. That makes for a better debate.

I welcome this debate, as well as the principle behind the millennium goals and what they are trying to achieve, but we must recognise that they are not being achieved and are unlikely to be achieved unless there are massive changes in attitudes at Gleneagles, the UN review and the World Trade Organisation. I hope that we will not be here in a year or two with more hand wringing, expressions of deep concern and concerts in favour of greater effort and development, while things get no better in many parts of the world. There have to be real step changes in a lot of things.

What has been impressive in the past five to 10 years is the attitude toward world poverty and world development. I do not try to make a partisan point, but I recall a time when elections in this country were dominated by international aid, although "dominated" is perhaps too strong a word. It would be an issue, and we would say that we wanted to increase aid. Candidates from other parties would say that they wanted to abolish it, and the media simply would not report on or discuss it. During the recent general election campaign, when Make Poverty History and world poverty day came up, there was a degree of unanimity in that we agree that the issue has to be addressed, which must be a good thing.

This morning, I was at a meeting of the regional council of my union, Unison, which, like many other organisations, is fully signed up to Make Poverty History. Letters on the subject are being sent out to Unison members, which many of us will receive. One extract from a draft of the letter says:

> "Rich countries have a moral obligation to provide a major increase in resources through increased aid and debt cancellation. Governments must de-link trade policy, debt relief and aid provision from the pursuit of corporate, political and foreign policy objectives and focus efforts on eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development."

I am sure we all agree with that, but what is significant is the fact that that is now seen as the norm and part of mainstream politics rather than something separate or different. I strongly recommend that Members listen carefully to lobbyists. I have always been impressed with how the trade justice lobby, the world development lobby and all the other aid and development lobbyists try to influence Members of Parliament, the efficiency with which they organise their lobbying and—I pay tribute to a friend who spoke earlier on this—the very good information that they provide. I spend time meeting the Trade Justice Movement in my constituency, and come away from meetings having said little and learned a great deal, which is not often the outcome of local meetings.

Not so long ago, before the election, we had a debate in this Chamber about the Commission for Africa and what would come out of it. I have a lot of time for the commission. When it was set up, I was sceptical about it and thought it was yet another example of a rich, white European country deciding the solution to Africa's problems. I could be called cynical, but that view was shared by many others. I do not go along with every dot and comma of the commission's report any more than anybody else does, but I absolutely go along with the general thrust, which recognises that unless we do something dramatic and serious about improving the living standards of large numbers of people in sub-Saharan Africa, those living standards will not stay as they are, but will get worse. The crisis of southern Africa will get worse and it will go into an abyss of ever-declining living standards and ever-falling life expectancy while we say, "Well, it's nothing to do with us and we cannot do anything about it." Well, it is a great deal to do with us in many ways.

One factor, although other Members may not agree, is that Europe and north America—particularly Europe—have made a great deal of money and taken a great deal of wealth out of Africa in the past 300 years. Every major corporation in the City of London, and certainly the older ones, has a history of doing that. Britain did extremely well out of the slave trade. That is an historical fact. The Secretary of State and the commission report readily acknowledge that Africa's development is designed for extractive industries and extractive agriculture, which take products out. Why are there no trans-African highways or railways? Why are there hardly any trans-African air communications? Everything there is designed towards communications with Europe or north America and towards taking things out, rather than developing a sense of African community or inter-African trade. The commission recognised that and we must do something about it.

There are very immediate crises. I have raised issues about many countries in Africa and I raise Angola as a short example, mainly because, for understandable reasons, we could not have a debate on that country earlier this year. Angola has come out of a terrible crisis—30 years, or perhaps longer, of war—and the majority of the population have very low living standards. Possibly half the children are not in school. Illiteracy rates may be stable or rising, but, because of the shortage of teachers, schools, books, equipment and the rest of it, I would be surprised if they were falling. That issue must be addressed.

The Government of Angola readily acknowledge all that, and the IMF is having discussions with them about transparency agreements and future budgetary arrangements before a donors' conference can be held. At some point, I imagine that Angola will have a very good standard of living, given its resources, oil, agriculture and the skills of its population, but at present it has not and an awful lot of people there live very miserable lives. A lot of children are dying very young from wholly preventable conditions.

I would be grateful if the Minister gave us encouragement about the possibility of a donors' conference for Angola, because that country has come out of the most ghastly conflict, which was fuelled by the rest of the world's thirst for oil and diamonds and by the voracious appetite for profits of the world's arms

[Jeremy Corbyn]

industry, which has poured arms in. Angola is not the only country in Africa to have suffered from such problems, but I give it as an example. I would be grateful if the Minister said a couple of words about Angola in his winding-up speech.

The hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) asked whether we should be talking about charity and mentioned the idea that charity begins at home. I do not like the use of the word "charity", nor the idea that we are discussing charity. I talk about justice—that is what we should be talking about. Do we wish to live in justice in this world? Yes, justice comes from the provision of increased aid and investment, but crucially—other Members have raised this issue—it also comes from our attitude towards world trade, the amount of goods produced by highly skilled farmers that can be sold at a reasonable price abroad and the amount of indigenous agriculture that can be developed into food processing.

This is a common theme: why does Africa produce lots of cocoa, but no chocolate? Why is there very little food processing in Africa and in some other countries of the world? The WTO round in Mexico collapsed essentially because of the greed of the rich countries, which were not prepared to concede the needs of the poorest. I hope that the next WTO summit will recognise that the unity of the southern countries in demanding justice is a very important step forward.

It is always interesting to discuss such issues with the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), with whom I sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. I raised the question of living standards and poverty around the world in a genuine way. The International Labour Organisation attempts to defend the rights of workers to basic living requirements, basic health and safety, and basic rights of representation. I fully support that, but the organisation is too weak and needs to be made much stronger.

We cannot go on saying that we are going to open up trade barriers with China, or with any other country, and do nothing about the abominable—virtually slave labour—working conditions of the many people who work in factories in those countries producing cheap clothes from which we benefit and from which British companies make a great deal of profit. I would like a much stronger ILO, running in parallel with the WTO. What that might achieve?

The last point that I want to make on that area involves the question whether trade is free or fair. If we allow untrammelled free trade to be imposed on a third-world country, that will result in destruction of the local agriculture and of whatever local industries there are, and in global corporations coming in and doing what they like and disappearing when they like. It must be recognised that it is perfectly reasonable to have trade barriers to allow a developing country to develop industrial infrastructure of the kind that it probably lacks.

John Bercow: For the avoidance of doubt, I say to the hon. Gentleman that I strongly believe that we should not countenance practices by companies in the developing world that would be regarded as morally unacceptable in our own country. Slave labour, for example, is just plain wrong. However, I am a little nervous about what the hon. Gentleman might have in mind in terms of uprating wages, for example.

May I also put it to the hon. Gentleman that the problem for those west and central African economies is the dumping of agricultural produce? Does he also accept that although those countries should have a chance to develop their domestic base, they cannot expect to have the freedom to do so indefinitely? Surely there should be some target date after which they should compete in the international marketplace.

Jeremy Corbyn: When the hon. Gentleman spoke earlier, he kindly offered me a job as head of a world regulatory commission, which I am still considering—I need to know a bit more about the terms involved. However, I have some ideas that I might be able to bring to bear on that subject. It is a kind offer, but I will put it on one side.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about food dumping. It is morally wrong that the US Government and the EU Commission pay farmers to over-produce. They then use taxpayers' money to buy the over-production, so it is already a double purchase, and it is then shipped at enormous public cost across the seas to be dumped as maize on African societies. That destroys all the local agriculture and leads to urbanisation and all the problems that go with it. The practice is simply crazy and must be stopped. It is, of course, one of the issues that led to the WTO breakdown.

Ms Dari Taylor: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: I will, but I am conscious that 13 minutes is the target. We have to keep to targets.

Ms Taylor: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend's statements about the ILO. I, too, have a great deal of respect for that organisation, but I ask him to consider the fact that if what the women involved in SEWA are saying is anything to go by—they are saying it in a very truthful and factual way—the ILO is very male dominated and very resistant to new or different women becoming involved in the organisation. Frankly, it really needs the involvement of such women.

Jeremy Corbyn: I defend the ILO as an institution and as an organisation in relation to what it is there to do, but I also agree with my hon. Friend that there must be many changes in that organisation and that it must recognise the role of women in a much better way.

The last point that I want to make concerns the UN, which has been discussed by virtually everyone in the debate, and the role of NGOs in it. As hon. Members will have heard before, I have attended many sessions of the UN Commission on Human Rights, which can be interesting and informative or irritating and annoying. I understand where the Secretary-General of the UN is coming from when he talks about some kind of panel to deal with human rights issues, but I have two questions: who goes on the panel and who decides who goes on the panel? We like to think that we are perfect where human rights are concerned, but we are not. The United States is not; France is not; many countries are not. Few people are.

A founding principle of the UN was that it should be open to civil society representatives. Although I acknowledge the problems caused by the operation of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, one of its strong aspects is that Governments who abuse the human rights of their citizens, whose behaviour is unacceptable, who have a death penalty and so on can be challenged by civil society NGOs. It is important to maintain the right of civil society to be represented in the UN and the principle of challenge.

I understand why the hon. Member for Buckingham said that not every country should have the right to be in the commission. Every country should be a member of the commission, but the civil society NGOs that oppose what is being done in their countries should have the right to challenge those countries if necessary. It is necessary to have such a forum. I do not want the whole thing to be hived off to a grand sub-committee in New York that meets in private and does not allow civil society representatives to challenge what various Governments are saying.

This may the subject for another debate, but we must recognise the fact that the UN should have a role in conflict prevention. I opposed the Iraq war, as did many others, but that is not the point I want to make today. There are many other conflicts in the world, with many victims, and in many of them no one is making any effort whatever to try to achieve peace or resolve the conflict. We should not allow our political thinking to be guided by wherever the CNN cameras happen to be.

4.56 pm

Peter Luff (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn). Again, and rather to my surprise, I find myself largely in agreement with him. However, for reasons that he will understand, I am glad to say that I did not agree with everything that he said.

Why are we debating a subject that seems to command such wide general consensus? First, I am suspicious of consensus. When politicians all agree, we quickly get a great sloppiness of thinking, and it is important that aspects of the consensus are challenged. I am delighted that some things have been said today that challenge the consensus, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), with whom I find myself in virtually complete agreement. The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 stands as a memorial to consensus.

Secondly, we need to demonstrate parliamentary support in order to influence the Government's priorities. On the whole, the Government are doing a remarkably good job in this area. However, even this Government could do better, and their priorities could be different. It is important to demonstrate our strong support for what is going on, and we need to encourage the Department for International Development and the Chancellor to continue being robust.

Thirdly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry) said, we need to send a message not only to the wider international community, but particularly to the United States of America. Still on the subject of consensus, we often talk about what the millennium development goals might achieve for poorer countries, but we need to be more honest about the consequences for ourselves. It is not a zero sum game; far from it. The whole world would be better off physically, economically and morally if the millennium development goals were achieved, but within that process there will be winners and losers.

A classic example of that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor)—the growth of Indian call centres. That could mean pain for our constituents, although not yet as call centre employment is still growing in the UK. However, when we lose jobs to India we are witnessing the development of that country, and that country's progress towards the millennium development goals.

Ms Dari Taylor: I am interested in that statement. The hon. Gentleman is right that call centres are growing at an exponential rate in India, but would he not accept that they are paying such good salaries to their employees, especially their engineers, that they are taking people from areas of India where they are desperately needed? Like everyone, they have families to bring up and they want the best for them—and the best income. The downside for me is certainly not the movement of call centres to India, but the fact that they are attracting some of the country's brightest and most capable engineers, who would be more beneficial to their communities if they worked elsewhere.

Peter Luff: I do not intend to have a lengthy debate about Indian call centres—it was a tangential remark—but I disagree with the hon. Lady because staff turnover in call centres is so fast. The Indian economy is now so strong that people typically spend a maximum of two years in a call centre before moving on to somewhere else. That is a win-win situation, as they improve their English, which is India's unique selling proposition in terms of international development. That is another debate, but I do not accept what the hon. Lady said.

On consensus, we all agree that the goals are terribly good and we welcome them. However, I have a slight worry because we have been here so often before—I was involved with the Brandt report in 1980 and I remember the public excitement about the Live Aid concerts. We march people up to the top of the hill, and we march them down again, and sometimes we are seen to fail. I am delighted that the Minister accentuated the positive about particular African countries in his opening remarks, but the fact is that sub-Saharan Africa is in serious trouble in relation to the goals. I worry about the danger of disillusion if we are seen to fail.

I do not accept that the problems are insuperable; quite the opposite. They are immensely soluble given the right international will. It is crucial that we do not let the people down on the goals and that they are not over-ambitious. The Minister cited many of the problems in sub-Saharan Africa, and the Chancellor has also been honest about them in his public statements, detailing how primary education for all will be 115 years late, the halving of poverty 135 years late, and the elimination of avoidable infant deaths 150 years late. That means that it will be one sixth of the way into the new millennium or, given the average lifespan of an African citizen of 30 to 33 years, four to five generations of Africans, before the goals are achieved in sub-Saharan Africa. That is a matter of great concern.

[Peter Luff]

The next question, which relates to my point about how there is sometimes pain in achieving such goals, is whether the European Union and the United States of America are genuinely willing to do what is necessary to fulfil the goals. Recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham highlighted the subsidy to US cotton farmers, and he was right to do so—it totals some $3 billion a year. Will the Americans make progress on eliminating those subsidies? They must do, because otherwise the consequences will be devastating.

Is there also a willingness for lobby groups to accept the important role of the private sector? That has been a feature of today's debate. The Tanzanian water example has obviously been a great concern, but if we consider the work done by the growing sustainable business scheme of the United Nations Development Programme, we can see exactly what good work can be done by the private sector in the right conditions, properly controlled and to universal acclaim. That is tremendously important. As a special adviser to the UNDP, Richard Sandbrook said about the important subject of water:

"To meet the Millennium Development Goals you have, for example, to connect 300,000 people every day with water—and you need a lot of plumbers to do that... By and large, governments don't employ plumbers and neither do NGOs, so scaling up depends absolutely on the private sector's technology and skills."

This is a matter of using those skills in the right way.

Do we have a genuine willingness to accept and respect local cultural traditions? We often talk about developing countries owning their poverty reduction programmes, but sometimes that means some difficult choices, particularly in relation to indigenous peoples. There is a real risk of cultural imperialism by the west, especially on animal rights issues. When we restrict the ability to hunt species that are not in danger, what do we do to indigenous peoples? There is also a danger of cultural imperialism in labour laws, which is what worries me about the comments of the hon. Member for Islington, North. There is a risk of imposing our idea of acceptable conditions on developing countries. I would qualify what my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said, and my test would be to ask "Is what we are doing morally acceptable in those countries?" We should be reluctant to impose our standards, which could just be a barrier to trade, drive up wages and destroy the competitive advantage that those developing countries enjoy. It is a difficult choice.

This is about priorities, which is why the debate is so important in helping the Government to argue the case powerfully at the various summits that we will have this year. A recent report on UN reform by the Secretary-General said that development

"serves multiple functions. It helps combat the poverty, disease and environmental degradation that kill millions and threaten human security. It is vital in helping states prevent or reverse the erosion of State capacity, key to meeting almost every class of threat. And it is part of a long-term strategy for preventing civil war, and for addressing the environments in which both terrorism and organized crime flourish."

That is an obvious point, but worth quoting: in significant part, development is about reducing terrorism.

I thought that the working assumption is that the world needs to find an extra $50 billion in development aid, although the Minister gave the figure as $100 billion in his speech. I think that the World Bank quote is between $40 billion and $70 billion. It is not a huge amount of money, whoever is right. However, the aid flows to Africa fell between 2002 and 2003. Coupled with the war in Afghanistan, the Iraq war—I admit that I supported it—has cost the United States of America some $225 billion, and rising. If money can be found for such things, perhaps rightly, it must also be found to achieve the millennium development goals.

More controversially, perhaps, I read that we are about to be charged £93 each for an identity card—£372 for a family of four. I would rather make that contribution to Water Aid; that would do more to make my family and this country safer than would an identity card scheme.

John Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that the force of his argument is underlined by the fact that the United Nations first committed to the 0.7 per cent. target in 1970, and that in the intervening 35 years the increase in real disposable income of the citizens of member states has massively increased, beyond the increase in the contributions that Governments make to the poorest countries in the world?

Peter Luff: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point, with which I entirely agree, and draws me rather faster than I anticipated to my next and last set of remarks, about the international community. The USA gives roughly a quarter of all official development aid in the world. That amounts to 0.16 per cent. of the GDP of that immensely rich country. I believe that, as part of this week's agreement, the new accession countries to the EU have agreed to give 0.17 per cent. of their GDP. That is only marginally more in percentage terms, but what a brave and courageous thing it is for those countries, which are still in need of structural funds from the EU, to make that commitment. I hope that the USA will consider its policies.

Let me make a practical suggestion. We have rightly talked a lot about trade. If the USA were to abandon its cotton subsidies and to give the money, instead, to the global fund to fight HIV/AIDS, which, coincidentally, needs to be replenished by roughly the same amount, the world would have a double whammy of benefit. The trade-distorting subsidies, which make life miserable for so many cotton farmers in the developing world, would go and we would be able to fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria much more effectively. Perhaps the Prime Minister could take that idea with him to Washington.

Many things have been said about strengthening African peacekeeping. My hon. Friend was right to question the use of the word peacekeeping in this context, but it is tremendously important. The one thing of which I am most ashamed in my 13 years in this place is that I did not take a more active stand on the events in Rwanda when they were unfolding. Now it is happening again, in Sudan, and it shames me that we can be so complacent.

On corruption, I remind everybody that it takes two to be corrupt. It is not said so often these days, but I heard it from some candidates during the election

campaign, that we do not help those in the third world because they are corrupt. That is an appalling thing to say, but we should not forget that it takes two to tango. I am intrigued to know what information my hon. Friend has to share with the Minister. He is right about the extractive industries transparency initiative and the publish what you pay initiative. Those are good, but they are only voluntary schemes; they have no mandatory status, I understand. If they are to be really effective, those transparency initiatives should be mandatory. The G8 summit in July could agree that, and I would welcome it.

Together with climate change, this is the central issue that faces the international community. Sometimes the debate is conducted in simple slogans by pressure groups that might not understand the complexities. Sometimes the experts get hold of it and make what ought to be simple tremendously opaque, difficult to understand and unnecessarily complex. That is often used as an excuse for delay. Politicians, as we have seen today in this very good debate, must straddle that gap and lead this vital debate. They must make sure that the whole international community—not just British people—remains absolutely engaged with the target of meeting the millennium development goals.

5.9 pm

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to wind up this debate on behalf of the Back Benches. Let me start by welcoming my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds) to his role on the Front Bench. He will find, as I did when I began to take an interest, that not only is the subject absolutely engrossing, but in this House a number of remarkable colleagues understand it very well, have spent a lot of time on it, and speak on it with depth and clarity. Therefore, a debate is always well worth listening to. I am sure that he will enjoy his role, as will the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George).

I want to make an observation, a couple of provocative points and a plea. First, the observation is that, as every other speaker has said, few political issues in this country during the past 20 years have grown as much as international development in terms of the public's understanding, the pressure that they put on politicians and our perception of the issues. We have not been alone and the combination of millennium development goals and the Monterrey consensus has created, for the first time, a powerful global compact for development with, at last, a mutual interest between the developed and the developing world. Instead of development being foisted on some countries, there is a mutual compact. There has been a sea change and, as the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) said, international development has moved a long way in one generation from charity to the proper realm of justice, and rightly so.

Secondly, one reason why long-term millennium development goals are destined to succeed, even if not within the time scale set out, is the greater aspiration for a better measurement system and accountability both in developing countries and in developed nations to ensure that things work, not only at Government level but at the grass roots. I shall refer to that later, but the two changes are significant.

Thirdly, progress should not be underestimated. Global poverty has declined over the past 20 or 30 years and the world is indebted to the extraordinary changes in China, the far east and east Asia, but sub-Saharan Africa has, tragically, been left behind. We have a renewed commitment to improve the position there. However, the progress and the reasons for it should interest us as we consider where to go next.

I turn to my contentious points. We welcome the public's remarkable engagement with the topic and I sympathise with the comments made by the hon. Member for St. Ives and the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) because there is an element of truth in what they said. We know that in our constituencies a growing number of people are interested in and care about the matter and are engaged in a remarkable way. However, if we are honest, we also know that the matters that move people to vote at general elections do not yet include the cause with which we are engaged today. That is the truth, so we must spread the message more widely. We have a role to play in that, as do the remarkable campaigners who have driven the message. The campaigners have a great responsibility because their word on the subject is accepted more easily than anything we say. If a celebrity or an NGO says something about trade justice they are listened to and their words are accepted. If the Government or Opposition politicians say something, people think that they have a vested interest. Accordingly, NGOs and campaigning organisations must be scrupulous in the way they handle the matter and tell people about the difficulties with which we know that it is bedevilled. I am raising two.

First, trade justice, capitalism, market forces and the like are not easy subjects to discuss. The trade justice movement encompasses those who would like to return to a Marxist system of economics and distribution as well as those who appreciate that those days have gone. An interesting debate in *The Times* recently was stimulated by Stephen Pollard's article on 23 May. The responses in *The Times* today take us in a direction that we would like to go. The truth is that the extremes of the argument generate far more heat than light. The matter is complex and is not just about free trade or fair trade. Finding a pathway through the argument is important and will involve compromise. If business is made out to be the enemy, none of us will be served very well. It is patently true that the changes in the east have been driven by market forces, an understanding of the world markets and an ability to engender growth and deliver people from poverty.

Equally well, we know that the rapacious nature of capitalism can bring untold harm in its wake. However, those involved in educating the public must be honest. They have a responsibility to ensure that people, particularly youngsters, are not given the sense that every business involvement in the developing world is somehow at our advantage and at the developing world's disadvantage. I, too, have been taken with some of the examples that the UN has used in its business development organisations to highlight what should be done.

I should like to quote from a book by Tony Campolo, who is that rare thing—a left-of-centre evangelist in the United States, and thus a brave man who has endured

[Alistair Burt]

many difficulties. He gives the example of the work of Gulf and Western and Charles Bluhdorn in the Dominican Republic from the 1970s onwards:

> "Responding at first to the negative critiques of its practices in the Dominican Republic by such groups as the Roman Catholic Adrian Sisters and the National Council of Churches, Bluhdorn led his company to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in social and economic programs that would benefit the Dominican poor. Initially, he had to put up with significant opposition from his board members and the stockholders of the company, but Bluhdorn persisted in changing corporate practices in the Dominican Republic, and the result was a change of attitude among Dominicans toward Gulf and Western. Hostility faded and appreciation grew in its place. Today a former top executive of the company, who was once in charge of Gulf and Western operations in the Dominican government, has won a popular election to be vice president of the country."

There are other examples of where business can work with the grain of people's just and moral demands. We must ensure that people are aware of that.

The second difficulty picks up on what my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) said. It relates to governance and its importance in dealing with some of the problems that we face. Those who campaign should pay proper attention to it. Sometimes, we think of governance as a top-down process and imagine that the remedy to problems is to approach Governments and say, "You must do this and work from the top down, to make practices more open." However, that is not always what needs to be done.

I have picked up a fascinating example from Uganda involving funds going to local schools. A report quoted in the compendium "Global Crises, Global Solutions", with which a number of us are familiar, says that the problem in that case was that for every dollar of central Government funds only 20 cents made it to the schools. However, the response was not to tell the Government in Uganda to do things differently, but to expand the knowledge of parents and teachers in the school areas, letting them know how much money was coming through and charging them with the responsibility of ensuring that the schools were accountable for how much was delivered. Governance and accountability did not come from the top down, but came from the bottom up. That is an example of a remarkable success in changing attitudes and moving things along. It is important that such examples are given proper weight when considering the changes that need to be made as we drive towards achieving the millennium goals.

My last point is to reiterate what I said to the Secretary of State yesterday about World Vision's work with orphans and vulnerable children in Africa, in looking at the commitments that have been made to those children but which are not yet being met. There is an urgent need to look hard at research into children's formulas for antiretroviral treatment. The absence of that is causing considerable concern. If developed nations put a lot a time and effort into that, it would make a real difference. If the Minister could go back with that particular plea in relation to meeting the health targets, I would be grateful. It has been a pleasure to listen to the terrific contributions made in this debate.

5.20 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas: With your leave, Mr. O'Hara, and that of the House, I will try to respond to many of the specific points that were made in an excellent debate with many provocative and passionate speeches from all sides. I pay tribute to the contribution made by the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George), as it was his first speech in a debate on the subject. He gave notice that he could not be here for the wind-ups, and I am grateful to him for that.

I take in specifically the last point made by the hon. Member for (Alistair Burt), but I also agree particularly with the first of his provocative points about the need for NGOs active in the debate to be considered in their comments and to be careful about their interventions. I am thinking in particular about one report that has just come out and one that is about to. The search for quick headlines will not do our collective cause any good.

I want to respond to some of the points made by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds). Are we on track to meet the target of 0.47 per cent. by 2008? Yes, we are, which will leave us on track to achieve our goal of 0.7 per cent. by 2013. We want to try to achieve that goal more quickly and our route to that is to establish the international finance facility. As other hon. Members have recognised, we are making the case to others in the international community for support to enable us to do that.

The hon. Gentleman also made the case for more aid to NGOs. I am sure that he will recognise the fact that the Government have made a 40 per cent. increase in funding to small and medium-sized NGOs from this year. We also increased the funding for the bigger NGOs with which we work. We have an ongoing relationship with many NGOs, particularly those that we work with when a humanitarian crisis breaks out. We want to continue to develop and strengthen that relationship. A number of initiatives are under way to strengthen our relationship with those NGOs that perhaps have not had regular contact with DFID offices or access to DFID funding streams in the past.

In the end we have to recognise that, although NGOs can make an important contribution, we have to strengthen Government systems. If we want to see universal access to good health care and good schooling, we have to strengthen the governance at the heart of that. That is why the bulk of our aid will continue to be directed through Government mechanisms; we have confidence in the strength of those mechanisms or Governments' willingness to strengthen them.

As I have said on previous occasions, Zimbabwe and Burma stand out as examples of where we cannot put money through Government mechanisms and have to continue to work through NGOs and through UN organisations. If the governance situation were to change, we would undoubtedly be able to offer more effective support, as we do in other countries. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness also asked whether we should not do more to promote good governance. We are already doing a considerable amount, but I accept that we need to do more. One of the reasons why the millennium review summit is so important is that we believe that it will help to strengthen the international architecture of government; the Peacebuilding

Commission is just one powerful example of how that architecture will improve. We continue to provide support to the many regional international institutions around the world and it is not least our priority to increase the capacity of the African Union.

The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) referred to the donor conference initiated by the African Union. I am sure that he recognises that we were one of the first to give support to the AU mission in Sudan. It is encouraging that the joint EU-NATO-UN mission in early May went to look at some of the difficulties with the AU mission in Darfur. The donor conference has produced a result—more cash to expand the effectiveness of the process. I welcome, too, the initial announcements that have been made about the additional cash that has been provided.

We also need to do more to strengthen Governments at national level in developing countries. One of the roles that the UN and donor Governments such as ourselves can play is in promoting and supporting elections. One thinks of Afghanistan, where the UN and donor countries such as Britain have played a key role in helping to fund and organise elections. Of course, we need to continue to do more to promote action in tackling corruption. We already provide support to anti-corruption commissions, to strengthen justice systems, to improve security sector operations and to get effective police and military operations in-country, so that there is good law and order. That is crucial to creating the stability that is needed for development to take place.

I share the view that fairer trading arrangements have the biggest potential in terms of development and lifting people out of poverty. Free trade per se is not needed; fairer trading arrangements are required. We need the sequenced opening of markets and the sequenced lowering of tariffs by developing countries. We need to recognise that we, as developed nations, have a huge responsibility to lift trade barriers that we impose.

We want European partnership agreements to be as development-friendly as possible. We are talking to other states in the European Union about our position and our beliefs regarding how we achieve that goal. I know from conversations that I have had with those leading the negotiations involving some of the regional groupings in EPAs that they welcome the stance that we have taken, they are pleased with the way negotiations are proceeding and they do not currently want to look at alternatives to EPAs.

Hon. Members have talked about the need for aid to be made more effective. That could be done by persuading all donors to untie their aid. World Bank estimates alone suggest that aid would become 25 per cent. more effective if every donor's assistance was untied. Our aid is untied, and the European Union has taken action to ensure that its aid is untied, but others could do more.

We also want aid to be more predictable, with donors committing for a much longer period. Such aid needs to be in support of national development plans and developing countries' priorities, and channelled through national systems. We are demonstrating good practice with the 10-year memorandum of understanding that we have signed with the Government of Sierra Leone. It sets out our commitments to that country over a longer period.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) made a telling contribution in reminding us to concentrate on the issues involving gender at the millennium review summit. On maternal mortality, infant mortality and the AIDS epidemic, we must tackle the particular disadvantages that women face if we are to achieve more progress in meeting the millennium development goals. I cite to her the girls' education strategy paper that we published in January and our determination to put £1.4 billion over the next three years into promoting good education. That is one example of the commitment that this Government are putting behind the goals.

I have made it clear that we want to see a greater debate about sexual and reproductive health rights. We will do more on the needs of orphans and vulnerable children. I have heard the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) about capacity and the potential role of small NGOs and the one made by the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire about antiretroviral therapy. I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) about Angola and the International Labour Organisation.

I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) about Sudan and I hope that the donor conference that took place today offers him some reassurance. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North both made telling points about the human rights machinery—

It being half-past Five o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 June 2005

[MR. JOE BENTON *in the Chair*]

Tax Credits

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Joan Ryan.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): It is evident from the numbers present this morning that tax credits are a matter of great interest to hon. Members—and not only because of the constituency casework that we do. As national politicians, also, we have seen the development of a welcome change in the way in which we try to assist people, and particularly try to help them back into work. It is a tribute to the efforts that the Government have made in recent years that colleagues from all parts of the country, and the House, are here this morning. If it will help hon. Members to get their points made, I am keen to take as many interventions as possible, as an alternative to many speeches.

I have a few thoughts, as I am sure we all have, on how the tax credit system should be improved, but I think that I should give the right perspective by saying straight away that since 2003 my constituents in Nottingham, North have massively benefited from the new tax credit system. I shall not regale hon. Members with the statistical basis of my findings of deprivation in my area; I think that they are aware of that. However, rather like your constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is an area in need of assistance from the Government, particularly in the matter of helping people to stay in work or get back into work. The new tax credit system has been a great boon in that respect.

My constituency has traditionally had high unemployment, and tax credits are helping to encourage parents and low earners back into work. They contribute significantly to the lowering of child poverty. They show that the Government have taken action to help families who need support with the responsibilities that come with parenthood. It is a great credit to the Chancellor, and the Minister present today, who is a long-serving Minister dealing with this area, that they have fought through to bring about many of those changes from the beginning of the Labour term in 1997. They worked to move the machine; whether one approves of the way in which it was moved will, I am sure, be debated today in the Chamber, but it took tremendous political will and leverage.

I want to chide the Minister in the gentlest way. The word credit reminds me of the idea of taking credit, and I do not think that my hon. Friend or the Government have taken the credit for the proposals. The change that has taken place has been almost quiet and private, instead of an occasion for claiming credit for great things that have happened. Many people in my constituency think, somehow, when they get an additional payment, that the tax man has made a mistake.

Hon. Members: He has!

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Allen: Shortly; I shall set up my hon. Friend with a nice line before I do.

Many people who benefit from the tax credit proposals feel that they have got something for nothing, and that it came out of thin air, rather than being a result of the Government moving to make sure that they would be better off. Perhaps we need to take credit, as well as give tax credit.

If my hon. Friend's joke has passed, I shall continue, but if he insists on telling it, I shall give way.

David Taylor: My hon. Friend, and regional colleague, is right to say that we have a great deal to be proud of in the way that child poverty in particular has been relieved by the introduction of working tax credits. He said that many people feel that the tax man has made a mistake; are not there far too many cases in which the so-called tax man has done that? There are almost 2 million families paying an average of about £1,000 back because of errors made by the newly merged department. That cannot be allowed to continue, can it?

Mr. Allen: As always, my hon. Friend's thought processes are at least 10 minutes ahead of mine; I shall reach that set of difficulties in my speech. None the less it is important to offer the perspective that despite problems—which will, of course, arise—a major step forward has been taken for most families and most children living in poverty. This month in my constituency 7,900 in-work families are receiving tax credits. In those families, 12,700 children benefit from the extra money. The statistics are staggering, and they are a tribute to the work that has been done.

There has been a massive improvement in the take-up of tax credits, compared with the old working families tax credits and disabled persons tax credits in 2002; there are now 1,300 more families receiving support via income tax and through tax credits, and 2,000 more children in those families benefiting from the extra support. All in all there has been a 33 per cent. increase in tax credit recipients in less than three years in my constituency. A question that we all raised early on was about the level of take-up. It is far from perfect, but the figures from the past three years suggest that serious steps are being taken in the right direction.

It is the role of the House to jump on to the case when Ministers do not do all that should be done; we are all, no doubt, happy to do that. Equally, it is important to pay appropriate tribute to Ministers who listen and take action when Members of Parliament make representations. I have made representations over the years and want to record my thanks to the Minister for listening and, in particular, for taking action on the way in which the new tax credits are paid. That is creating a positive impact in my constituency. Now that awards can be changed in-year, constituents who have had a

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sudden fall in income can receive more, instead of having to wait until the end of the tax year, as they did previously.

Many of us also raised with the Minister in the past the matter of tax credit being paid to the main carer rather than the wage earner. Many mothers can now budget for their family more efficiently. The working tax credit offers, for the first time, in-work support for people who are in work and who are without children. It therefore helps ever larger numbers of low earners in Nottingham, North.

The tax credit system is giving much-needed assistance to families in my patch who previously felt stigmatised by claiming benefit, but who now have the opportunity to go to work, with 70 per cent. of their child care paid for. Families and individuals feel supported when they return to work, rather than having all their support snatched back when they begin to earn. Unemployment in my constituency is down by 44 per cent. and the results of the policy, combined with the minimum wage, vocational training and a strong economy, are plain.

As you would expect, Mr. Benton, with such a large new system, many hon. Members still receive distressing letters from people who have had problems. The final part of my speech is about that.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on an important subject. In many of the problem cases that he alludes to, people depend on advice from the citizens advice bureau. People who go to the CAB must overcome bureaucratic hurdles that they do not encounter if they go to see Members of Parliament. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that situation could easily be resolved, allowing the CAB to perform its vital role in this area of work, without the need for such bureaucratic hurdles?

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman replies, I want to mention a minor detail. Officially no Deputy Speakers have yet been appointed for this Parliament, and although it might sound like a trite, technical point, I should prefer to be addressed as Mr. Benton for the remainder of the sitting.

Mr. Allen: I am glad to oblige, Mr. Benton, but frankly, we all know that it is just a matter of time. I hope to catch your eye when that long-overdue promotion is made.

To return to the valid point made by the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), I noted that the Minister was shaking her head while he was speaking, and I would be keen to give way if she wanted briefly to respond.

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I shall explain the point to the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) during my allotted time rather than taking up time now. I shall explain the process for advice agencies, but also explore some of the ways in which it could be improved.

Mr. Allen: I look forward to hearing the answer to the hon. Gentleman's important point.

Before I get on to my set of questions, I want to place on the record my thanks to all those in my constituency who ensure that families on low incomes have the support that they require to earn a decent wage and bring up their children properly. They include people such as Alison Boyd of the Bulwell Sure Start, and my local citizens advice bureau, which does sterling work. I could not let this debate go by, however, without paying a special tribute to Kate Jarman, who works in my office. She works ceaselessly to secure for my constituents the help that they deserve, and her success generates yet more work by word of mouth. Many of us rely on such people in our offices; they understand the complexities of tax credits far more than I could ever hope to. The harder they work, the more work they make for themselves, because word gets around by word of mouth. As the hon. Member for Moray suggested, it would be preferable to have a system that worked without the intervention of Members of Parliament. However, we have a vital role to play while the edges are being knocked off some of the teething problems, and we often depend on those who support us in our constituencies. Perhaps, therefore, I can pay tribute on behalf of all hon. Members to those who serve us.

I also thank the civil servants connected with the MPs' hotline, who are often first in our firing line, but who invariably deliver a courteous and superb service in trying to resolve individual cases.

Finally, I welcome the Minister's statement last week, which set out precisely what she expects from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs in the way of improved customer service.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a very balanced argument, but if I have a criticism of the support given through the helpline and, in particular, of how it locks into the help given at local Inland Revenue offices, it is that staff have been somewhat overwhelmed. We need more people dealing individually with what we all accept are some very desperate people, who have found themselves in debt that they did not anticipate. Will my hon. Friend comment on that?

Mr. Allen: I hope that the Minister will also comment on that. People appreciate dealing with a human being, and nothing is designed to irritate them more than being put on hold, made to listen to Vivaldi, being given 10 different choices and finding that someone does not have the right information on their screen. Those are procedural and organisational issues, which I know the Minister is concerned about and wants to address, and she would certainly have the support of colleagues in all parts of the House if she did so.

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): I am a complete novice at this and I appreciate the opportunity to intervene. As a new Member of Parliament, I was shocked by the stack of cases that was handed on to me involving people who had been overpaid tax credits and who had consequently found themselves in debt. When I go back through the history, I find that they seem to have informed the authorities right from the beginning that an overpayment has taken place. I am looking at one case—the person has asked me not to name them—that goes back to May 2003. From the beginning, there

is a clear track record of information about the overpayment being made available and of reassurances from the tax office that there was no overpayment, and the whole matter continues to rumble on two years later. It is clear from some of the phrases used that that is causing stress and hardship. Would it be possible to have some genuine focus on sharpening up the administrative procedure, ensuring that papers are not lost and using clauses that require people to be compensated when their cases have not been treated appropriately?

Mr. Allen: The hon. Lady's comments belie her novelty. She has anticipated several of my points, and I am sure that she will be supported throughout the House by constituency MPs who have had similar problems. I know that the Minister will seek to address them.

On the back of my experience as a constituency MP who deals day to day with such casework, I propose—which MP could not?—a seven-point plan to improve the operation of tax credits, although I have a feeling that it may be a 10 or 12-point plan by the time I sit down. However, I introduce it in the spirit of, I hope, constructive criticism and in the certain knowledge that the Minister is more aware than any of us of the difficulties that certain constituents have. Again, I shall be keen to take interventions as I go through my points, if colleagues would find that helpful.

First, we need to reduce the problems brought about by the claims system itself. The annual system of payment can cause problems, particularly for low-income families who budget from week to week or month to month. Claims are initially based on the previous year's income, and the claim form asks only for income figures for the previous tax year—there is no space on the claim form to give expected current-year income. As eventual entitlement is calculated on actual current-year income, the system ends up overpaying many people, and repayments are then requested from families who are often ill-prepared to budget for them. We need to do two things. First, there needs to be much more awareness-raising to encourage claimants to notify in-year changes of income and so avoid overpayments building up. Secondly, we should consider amending the claim form to allow an estimate of current-year income to be given.

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that in the most recent period for which figures are available, 7,800 families in the highlands of Scotland were overpaid an average of £1,000 each and that that has now been clawed back? In the case of one constituent in Aviemore, a payment of £225 a month was reduced to one of £60 a month to claw back the overpayment. As a consequence, the person, who worked in a low-paid job, had to move out of their private rented accommodation and back in with their parents. That is a thoroughly unsatisfactory situation for that person. The system is having the perverse consequence of causing real instability in income and real hardship for the people it is designed to help.

Mr. Allen: We could all raise similar cases, although the perspective to bring to bear is that most cases are dealt with effectively and efficiently. All of us—above all the Minister, I am sure—want to ensure that there are fewer and fewer such cases. That is why I hope that we shall all operate in a constructive way this morning to bring points to her attention.

Anything that puts people off or increases fear—be it the bureaucracy or dealing with authority—must be tackled through our system. Citizens Advice recently suggested that the quality of the administration of tax credits is actually undermining some families' confidence about returning to work. Work incentives are affected by far more than whether claimant households will be financially better off in work or whether claimants will work more hours. My constituents need to understand their entitlement and to feel in control of their income, and that can be particularly true for claimants returning to work after long periods off sick or after having children. All the psychological disincentives that come with a change to a big system need to be worked at almost daily to ensure that people are not afraid to use that system, which has been put in place to help.

My second point is about award notifications. Comprehensive award notices and quick, clear administrative processes are vital if claimants are to get the payments to which they are entitled at the right time. The award notices sent to claimants are complex and confusing, especially where there has been an overpayment and adjustments have been made to the award. Constituents have reported that they have spent more than half an hour on the phone to the tax credits helpline trying to get an explanation of the figures on a notification sent to them after they have been overpaid—a point alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). The helpline staff were unable to explain all the figures and my constituents eventually had to write in for a detailed breakdown. It is ridiculous to expect the average claimant—who, in a constituency such as mine, might not have high literacy or numeracy skills—to comprehend the process, let alone the figures. More user-friendly and accessible notification is needed.

Claimants must fully understand their award notice. They need to be able to see how much they are being paid and why. Adequate information should be included in the award notice or in an additional sheet. Recipients of the award notice should be able to see clearly which figures they need to check. As there is no calculation on the award notice, claimants should not be expected to notify the Inland Revenue if their award changes without warning, as they would have no reason to believe that the Inland Revenue had made a mistake, unless any of the obvious details on the award notice were incorrect, such as the number of children or income.

Claimants need to be shown how they came to be overpaid; otherwise, they do not know whether the Inland Revenue has a valid claim. Without that, it takes more time for claimants, case workers, or Members of Parliament or our assistants to discover the reason for the overpayment before they can even judge whether they should ask for a reconsideration of repayment.

When claimants receive a number of award notices, it is unrealistic for them to make an assessment of which is correct if each one is different. It is especially hard that claimants can then be blamed for overpayments as a result of an Inland Revenue error that they should have spotted

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and reported. If a number of in-year adjustments have been made, the claimant can reasonably expect the award notices to change each month and might miss an Inland Revenue error. Additionally, when award notices are sent out erratically, as they sometimes seem to be in Nottingham, North, claimants find it difficult to identify which notice corresponds to what they actually receive and the most up-to-date information. I welcome the Paymaster General's commitment to reduce unnecessary duplication of award notices, although the issue needs continual review.

A redesign of the award notice is necessary to make it more user-friendly and comprehensive. That would be positive for both sides, as the claimants would find the notices less intimidating and easy to understand, leading to fewer overpayments where claimants fail to spot Inland Revenue errors. Perhaps a panel of claimants could be assembled to assess the readability of the award notice—perhaps even some hon. Members present could give up a couple of hours to go through such award notices in a non-partisan way. With our experience in dealing with constituents' problems, we could spot things in a way that our good friends in the civil service may not always be able to.

David Taylor: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for highly desirable reforms. Has he had the opportunity to assess the value of a reform that a number of people have suggested, which is to abandon the in-year reassessments and return to a fixed-term award? Would that not simplify matters, despite the associated costs?

Mr. Allen: My hon. Friend makes a sensible suggestion, as always. However, although the proposal would resolve some of the problems that he has pointed out, it might lead to greater inflexibilities. I am sure that that is something on which the Minister would want to comment when she replies.

Dawn Primarolo: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because I would not like him or other hon. Members to go away with the thought that the award notices or the application forms were dreamed up by civil servants and not consulted on. The award notices were drafted in consultation with the community, the voluntary sector and the anti-poverty lobby, and were tested before use. At that time there was a clear consensus on those forms. On the points raised, I am more than happy to say that, with experience, we see that we might like other things. However, let us not run away with the idea that civil servants and Ministers dreamed the forms up. They were fully consulted on and accepted at the time. People can change their views, but they cannot blame civil servants for not consulting.

Mr. Allen: Let me put the record straight immediately. I certainly did not intend to cast any blame on civil servants, who have been remarkably adept at helping my office in a number of such cases. Their good will is beyond doubt. However, as the Minister points out, we can always continue to learn. It could be of assistance to bring together a panel of claimants or even interested MPs. I do not think that it would hurt and may help, as colleagues may be able to suggest one or two improvements to the form on the basis of their constituency experience.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman's seven-point plan, but before he winds up will he press the Minister on the scale of the problem? In Edinburgh, a relatively wealthy city, more than 10,000 people are affected and in Scotland as a whole more than 160,000 people are affected. Whereas individual cases are often tragedies in themselves, the overall problem in the UK should not have reached its current scale.

Mr. Allen: I shall let the hon. Gentleman's eloquent remarks press the Minister; otherwise, I am afraid that since I have not even reached the third point in my seven-point plan she may have no time to reply. I am allowing hon. Members to make interventions so that the Minister may then take up their points. I hope that that is a helpful way to proceed.

My third point concerns Inland Revenue decisions to recover overpayments. In Nottingham, North there have been numerous problems with constituents who have been told that they been overpaid child or working tax credit. To some extent that is inevitable because of the intended flexibility of the scheme, which relies on a check of families' income at the end of the year—a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor). However, it is still confusing for claimants to be told that, despite giving all the correct information and keeping the Inland Revenue informed, they have accrued an overpayment that they will have to repay.

There is an additional problem when overpayments are recovered, where families are put into real hardship as a result of their lower income arising from that. There is a discretion under section 28(5) of the Tax Credits Act 2002 as to whether to recover an overpayment. In practice, however, in Nottingham, North the Revenue seems to recover all overpayments automatically, regardless of how that affects the family involved.

In one case, a constituent whom I shall call Miss B, a single mother of two, was judged by her local Sure Start unit in February to have essential outgoings of £128.41. However, she was receiving only £120, owing to the fact that she had received a reduced child tax credit award, which was the result of an overpayment—which she disputed—from the beginning of the 2003 tax year. Even when that was put in writing to the tax credit office, it refused to consider the recovery of the overpayment. We continue to pursue the case from my office.

There is guidance outlining circumstances in which an overpayment may not be recovered, such as where there has been an official error and it was not the responsibility of the claimant to know that they were being overpaid. However, the Revenue appears to be applying that test only when a claimant requests a reconsideration rather than adhering to the guidance as a matter of course. Even where the Inland Revenue acknowledges its error, claimants must dispute the recovery and demonstrate that it was reasonable for them to have thought that their award was correct before the Inland Revenue will consider writing it off.

Two of my constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson, were in the position of having to repay £3,796 as a result of an Inland Revenue error marking them as disabled on the

computer. They carefully explained that they had never told the Inland Revenue that they were disabled and that they had also not received an award notice, despite contacting the tax credit office six times by phone and letter. Although that may seem a reasonably open-and-shut case, it took numerous letters from Mr. Dickinson and two requests from my office for information to be re-examined before the Inland Revenue conceded that the couple did not have to repay the money that they could never have known was not theirs.

Even that was not the end of the matter. Although the Inland Revenue took responsibility for the mistake and sent Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson a cheque for the money that was recovered from them last year, Mr. Dickinson phoned me last Thursday to say that they are still receiving letters saying that they have been overpaid, and they have yet to receive an award for this tax year. Apparently, that is due to a computer that is not up to date, and the whole process has so far taken more than a year. Judging by the murmurs of agreement from all parts of the Chamber, I suspect that the problem is encountered widely. I am allowing plenty of time for interventions so that all colleagues can speak.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): Is that not the sort of administrative error in relation to which the independent right of appeal suggested by the CAB would really speed up the system?

Mr. Allen: I hope that the Minister will deal with that.

Many constituents have contacted me on the issue that I have just alluded to, and my office can usually help them. However, for every one of them, several people, perhaps dozens—perhaps they do not know better or lack confidence—do not contact their MP and pay back the overpayment regardless of whether it resulted from their error or that of the Inland Revenue. The process rightly places a high degree of responsibility for action on the claimant. However, one result of that is that those claimants least able to understand their awards and least able to express themselves are the ones most likely to have their overpayments recovered in full, whatever the original cause.

The fourth matter is the recovery of overpayments while reconsideration is pending. Deductions for overpayments continue to be made while requests for reconsideration are pending. In the case of other benefits, it is possible to suspend recovery while the decision is under appeal. Given the length of time that it is taking the Revenue to respond to requests for reconsideration, many overpayments will have been recovered before discretion has been applied. Some families in my constituency are falling into debt while they await a decision from the Inland Revenue.

There should be a minimum level below which a family's weekly income should not be allowed to fall even if it is repaying an overpayment. It is essential to cap all reductions in payments so that families are not left with payments below 90 per cent. or 75 per cent. of their entitlement at any time during the tax credit year, regardless of whether the overpayment is discovered within or at the end of the tax year. In a system designed to help low-income families, whatever the reasons for an overpayment, it is essential that recovery should not cause hardship. However, at the moment automatic award adjustments can mean that families lose all their payments without warning due to relatively small overpayments resulting from delays in reporting changes of circumstances. Such adjustments cause huge problems for the families in my patch who are on the lowest incomes. They can find themselves pushed well below basic benefit levels and into acute hardship, because they received too much early in the year.

Fifthly, the length of time taken to respond to complaints can be excessive. One lone parent in my constituency first queried her overpayment in October 2003, and did not receive a substantive reply until October 2004. The matter is not yet resolved, as she still disputes the decision. Another working lone parent living in my constituency queried her overpayment in October 2004, and has still not received a response. There is no time limit within which the Revenue is required to deal with complaints. In the time it takes for complaints to be dealt with, my constituents have to get by on reduced means. One constituent, Miss Elizabeth Lloyd, was still waiting in May of this year for an arrears repayment of £471.39 from February 2004. Having gone past two tax year boundaries with no joy, she was told that if she were sent a manual payment the computer would register it as an overpayment and her awards would be reduced—despite the fact that that money is owed to her. A week ago, she contacted my office to say that even if her awards were reduced, she needed the money to pay her monthly bills. She should not be put in that position.

Although it is comforting for Miss Lloyd and others in the same position to know that they should get the money eventually, in most cases they need money immediately to fulfil their financial commitments. This is not some long-term middle-class financial speculation, with a return due in several years; it is often a matter of being able to feed the kids. Claimants have recourse to their MPs or the ombudsman, but that is not what our constituents need. They need a swifter system so that we need never be involved.

The same excuse seems to be given to my constituents and my office when they contact the Inland Revenue—that the computer is behind in its processing. It is unacceptable that my constituents have to wait for over a year for the computer to catch up. I welcome the Minister's statement that HMRC will improve the speed with which it identifies IT system problems and processing errors so that they can be resolved more quickly, and I would appreciate her assurances today that those who have already experienced problems will have their cases dealt with quickly and sympathetically.

Sixthly, some families experience delays in receiving other passported benefits, including milk tokens and reduced-price baby milk. Those benefits are, by definition, available only to families on very low incomes. Delays are often due to a time lag between the establishment of a claim and a name being passed on to the health services. The names seem to be passed on on a four-week cycle. A speedier system is necessary if we are to deliver full entitlement to the people in greatest need, particularly those with babies and young children. A swift and responsive system is needed for relating tax credit awards to entitlement to passported benefits and immediate notification of claimants. Failing that, there should be cash payments in lieu until passporting can be activated.

[Mr. Allen]

My seventh and final point concerns the accuracy of the Inland Revenue. The Inland Revenue annual report for the year ended 31 March 2004 gives an accuracy rate for decisions of 78.5 per cent. Many of my constituents believe that the Revenue is always right and does not make mistakes. That leads them to believe any letter that arrives, regardless of its content or how much hardship it will cause them; they just get on with it. The very families who are under the most stress, and least able to deal with form filling, filing, letter writing and badgering people on the telephone are those we need to encourage to query and challenge decisions that affect them and their families.

Some aspects of the administration of the current tax credit system undermine the Government's attempts to tackle child poverty and make work pay. I have seen far too many cases in which claimants are in the dark as to how their awards are calculated. The result is that when overpayments do occur, they are not picked up. Unfortunately, those are not isolated incidents; they continue to this day, and indicate the need for a more serious review to tackle system errors.

The annual system of tax credits, under which entitlement is often not finalised until several months after the end of the financial year, is different from that for other benefits, entitlement to which is established according to actual circumstances at the date of claim. Tax credits may also be reduced during the year or in the following year if there has been a change in income or an overpayment. That can lead to uncertainty about the level of income that can be expected from tax credits. It can be very difficult for families on low incomes to budget and plan if their tax credits are unpredictable. I applaud the goal of flexibility and responsiveness, but that has to be balanced against stability and predictability.

I hope that the Minister will accept that there needs to be serious review and reform in order to put some of these matters right. I would ask her to implement changes to solve some of the problems that I mentioned in the latter half of my contribution. They might well be teething problems, but they affect people severely, and deter hard-working families in my constituency from applying for tax credits.

The tax credit system is one of the most significant and positive improvements for my constituents that the Government have introduced. I congratulate the Minister and the Chancellor on all that they have done to establish it, and I hope that they will take from this debate not an attack on the whole tax credit policy, but the fact that many colleagues in all parts of the House have serious concerns about making the policy work in the way that the Government intend—for the benefit of their constituents.

I apologise again for having spoken for a considerable time. I do not normally do that, as you know, Mr. Benton, and I hope that colleagues benefited by being allowed a chance to intervene.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I point out that a number of points will have to be replied to? For the sake of good order, I will call winding-up speeches some time between 10.45 and 11 am. I ask hon. Members to be as brief as possible, because I would like to allow everybody to speak in such an important debate.

10.10 am

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) for his choice of subject for the first Westminster Hall debate of the new Parliament. He may know that the penultimate Westminster Hall debate in the previous Parliament was on tax credits, and there are some survivors from that debate in the Chamber this morning.

The fact that Back-Bench Members of Parliament are applying for, and securing, debates on tax credits at such regular intervals indicates the problems that confront our constituents and that arise from a complex and rather dysfunctional benefits system. When I was last called to speak, I was asked to compress my remarks into five minutes. I shall try to exercise the same self-discipline this morning.

It is as if one is trying to run a large number of appliances from one small three-pin socket. The plugs are overheating and the fuses are blowing all over the place. In the previous debate, I presumed to give advice as to how we might resolve the problems. I said that in the next Parliament—in other words, this one—we would need to stand back and examine the financial interface between citizen and state to see whether there was a better way to achieve the principle to which we all subscribe.

Can the interface be reduced by raising the tax thresholds? Can we do more on the universal benefit front? Would a universal taxable child benefit do the trick? Can the system be simplified in some way? I suggested that we should, in the next Parliament, stand back and examine what I described as a top-heavy, complex system, and asked this basic question: is there a better way to achieve the goals that we all want to achieve?

Had the Conservative party done better in the election, I am sure that the review that I wanted would now be under way and that my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) would be about to tell us all about it. We have, however, the human face of the Treasury to reply to the debate, and I hope that she can go a little beyond the brief that was read out in the previous debate. That brief was apologetic about the mistakes but basically unrepentant about the system.

Dawn Primarolo: I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman in that I could not respond to that debate and the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, now the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, had to step in. That was because unfortunately I was admitted to hospital that day and, as friendly as I may be, it is not possible to address the House from a hospital bed after an operation.

Sir George Young: We all understand why the right hon. Lady was not there, and we are delighted that she has recovered from the indisposition and can reply to the debate this morning.

To demonstrate the continuing need for reform, I shall briefly mention two cases that have cropped up since the previous debate. What is disturbing is that in each case that has come to my attention a different thing has gone wrong. It is not as if one component in the system is malfunctioning. I believe that the problems are more systemic.

Miss S of Andover has a seven-year-old disabled son and receives £160 a week in working tax credit. She pre-notified the Inland Revenue of a change of circumstances: she was going to move in with her partner. She told the Revenue that her partner had a temporary national insurance number, and she was assured that that did not matter. It did matter; the number was not recognised, the working family tax credit was stopped, and she was told that it would be two weeks before an interview could be held and a new national insurance number issued. She was also told that it would be five weeks before that number was recognised at Preston. Being £160 short for five weeks is a lot of money for a low-income household. Some £1,300 was put into her account on Friday. She told me yesterday that the whole saga had been an absolute nightmare, and that she had been given different advice each time she rang. Once, she was told to contact her MP as that was the only system that really worked. She was also told to go to the Inland Revenue office to ask for cash to tide her over, although the Revenue does not provide that facility. Miss S eventually obtained the money, but what she will say to her friends who are thinking of moving on to working tax credit will not be very helpful.

The second case involves Miss S of Whitchurch, who wrote in an e-mail:

"For the past 5 weeks we have had no Working family tax credit. To get any sort of idea what has been happening we have had to travel to Basingstoke every Monday to get some answers or to try and get some payment out of them . . . even they don't know what is going on . . . we have not been able to pay our rent, pay our phone bill or even sort the tax out on our car . . . When we have phoned the Inland Tax Office they have said to us that the arrears and the next payment are sat waiting to go from their computer but are waiting for a date to be inputted onto the computer so that it gets to our bank."

When I eventually took up the case, I received an answer from the Inland Revenue:

"Unfortunately Mrs S's 2005/6 tax credit award has been affected by a technical fault which is preventing our computer system from issuing payments into her bank account. This problem has been brought to the attention of our technical experts who are currently working hard to resolve this fault."

As the whole purpose of the working tax credit system is precisely to make payments into people's bank accounts, the failure of the computer system to do so seems to me slightly more than a technical fault.

I was told:

"A member of my team has therefore arranged for Mrs S to receive four weekly manual payments from May 27th until the system problems are resolved."

Before 9 May, the system had been broken for five weeks—that was how long it took to sort the matter out. Those are only two families whose lives have been turned upside down by the tax credit system. My experience is no different from that of colleagues.

The debate coincides with renewed media interest. Headlines last week stated that Chancellor Gordon Brown has been urged to reform the tax credits system and that he is under increasing pressure to revamp the Government's flagship tax credits. Figures released yesterday show that nearly half of all awards were overpaid in 2003–04, and, according to HM Revenue and Customs, some 45 per cent. of the awards proved to be wrong in the first year of operation.

The day before yesterday, the money section of *The Sunday Times* contained an article with the headline, "Victims of tax credit fiasco face hardship".

A Child Poverty Action Group leaflet that arrived on all our desks last week says:

"Non-take up of tax credits and benefits and the often unreasonable recovery of overpaid tax credits have actually created rather than prevented hardship. Government must get the administration of tax credits right to achieve its anti-poverty targets."

I was struck by another paragraph in the leaflet, which stated:

"Child benefit, a near universal benefit, provides a well-functioning mechanism that does not suffer the administrative or technical difficulties of tax credit."

That may well be a key to the solution.

There are two schools of thought: "one more heave", to which I believe the Government subscribe, or "back to square one", the philosophy to which I adhere. The whole structure is unstable, incomprehensible and unworkable, and I ask the Government to initiate a fundamental review of the system. I also ask that the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, when it is set up, carries out a parallel inquiry. Our constituents deserve better than what they are getting today.

10.17 am

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on securing the debate. Like the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), I am a survivor of the debate on 6 April. It was a good debate, and was initiated by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso), who made a very good speech. Sadly, he is not in the Chamber today. In that debate, I talked about four cases in my constituency. They are four of many such cases; time does not permit me to go through the almost 100 cases with which I have dealt.

In that debate, the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, now the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, gave a very helpful commitment to consider those cases and to make a general effort to sort them out. Alas, even those cases have not been sorted out. If an individual waiting for money was not so tragic, the way in which these cases have been dealt with would be on a par with an Ealing comedy.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North that we should be proud of this policy. I said so in the previous debate, and I say it again. When it works, it alleviates poverty in my constituency, North Durham. It is helping people to move from the

[Mr. Kevan Jones]

benefit culture into work, and we, as a Government, should be proud of that. Likewise, many voluntary organisations, including the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, have welcomed it. Bungling incompetence, however, is damaging it. As I believe I said in the previous debate, I am coming round to the point of view expressed by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire when he says that the policy needs a fundamental root-and-branch review.

Today's debate and the debate on 6 April have highlighted the fact that there are two problems. The first is that problems are being created. The second lies in trying to get them sorted out, which is difficult for most constituents. I do not accept that Members of Parliament should be treated any differently from members of the public. The problems of members of the public should be dealt with efficiently and properly when they try to contact the tax office. Alas, they are not.

I am glad that the Paymaster General is in the Chamber today, and that she has recovered from her illness. I was also pleased to hear her give her genuine commitment on "Moneybox" on Radio 4 to sorting out some of these problems. It was clear from the tone of her voice that some of the problems are as frustrating to her as they are to us.

The Paymaster General and others have made the point that the problems affect a small percentage of people. That may well be, but those people do not look on this money as pin money. It is not an additional sum to be spent on luxuries; it is money to live on from day to day, and the problems are leading people into debt. Most of those people, rightly, have an abhorrence of debt. They do not want to be in debt—and why should they be in debt through no fault of their own?

I welcome the Paymaster General's commitment to listen, to sort out the problem and to change the system where necessary. I want briefly to refer to two of the cases that I raised last time, which, in all genuineness, the then Economic Secretary gave a commitment to sort out. In fact, in the last debate he gave a commitment to hon. Members to look at all cases. Interestingly, there is a difference between what he said in this place and how the civil servants are interpreting it.

Just after the debate, my office received a phone call from a civil servant called Alison Dyer, who asked my assistant for details of the four cases that I raised. He pointed out, quite rightly, that she could in fact have all the cases that we were going to refer to the Economic Secretary. She disputed that; he then read to her over the phone the passage from *Hansard* in which the Economic Secretary had said that he would take on all cases. Lo and behold, three months later the four cases that I raised have been dealt with, but I am still awaiting a reply on the other 11 or 12 that I put forward. So the Paymaster General may give commitments in this place, but I suggest that she also makes sure that the civil servants do as they are told if Ministers give commitments in the House.

I want to raise two cases that I raised last time. One was the case of Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong of The Gardens, Chester-le-Street. The couple were honest with the Inland Revenue and completely up front. One month, they received two payments. Mrs. Armstrong contacted the tax office and said, " I'm sorry, I'm not entitled to this money." She was assured that she was and that it was because of an earlier underpayment. Lo and behold—we all have such stories—she was told that she would have to repay the money.

I raised that case in the last debate, and I was pleased to get a letter on 29 April from the then Economic Secretary. It highlighted the case and stated:

> "I am sorry that you are unhappy with the decision that Mr and Mrs Armstrong will have to repay their overpayment in full. HMRC have carefully reconsidered all the facts in this case and have decided that your constituents should not have been asked to refund their overpayment because it was reasonable for them to believe that their awards were correct based on the advice and the award notices they received."

Finally, it says:

> "I hope both you and Mr and Mrs Armstrong will find this helpful, and that their future dealings with HMRC will run much more smoothly."

That is a great outcome and we might think that Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong could go off into the sunset and that that would be the end of a happy story. Alas, that was not the case.

On 13 May, I received a letter from an individual I would love to meet—I am not sure whether he exists, but his name crops up quite often—Mr. Barrie Rushton, assistant director of customer relations at the Inland Revenue. He said that the money was not now being written off:

> "In this instance it has been deemed that the duplicated payments were sufficiently high enough for it not to be deemed reasonable for your constituents to believe that the payments they were receiving were correct."

Alas, he goes on to say that he realises that that will be a disappointment to Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong. Who is in charge: Ministers or civil servants?

Every time I write to the Paymaster General—I put her on notice today—I do not want replies from civil servants but from her. In future, I will not accept any replies from civil servants; they will be returned to her so that she can give a reply. It is important that she knows what is going on, because she clearly does not in some cases.

The second case to which I want to refer is that of Julie Simm, which I raised last time. She too was a constituent who had been open and honest with the Revenue and told its staff that she was being overpaid. Forty-two days later, she was informed that she had had an overpayment because they had clearly not rectified the system. I wrote to the Paymaster General on 19 January and received a reply in late March—another problem is the time that it takes for replies to come through. She stated that Miss Simm should have noticed that she had been overpaid, and that the overpayment would therefore have to be repaid in full. That seems to be a standard response: "Yes, we did make a mistake on behalf of the Revenue, but you should have noticed our mistake so it is your fault." I am sorry, but that is not acceptable. I have written back to the Paymaster General on that.

As I said earlier, I am proud of the system. It was designed in the right way to ensure that it helps some of the poorest in society. However, as a result of such cases the credibility of the system is falling down. I also worry how many people are not complaining and are just paying back the money. I think that there are a lot of such people. One of the issues raised by the CAB and others is that the system was designed to help people leave poverty, but it is actually leading them into poverty. They are sitting quietly paying back the money and, in some cases, facing huge hardship.

Some suggestions have been put forward by the CAB and others, and some have been put forward today by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North. They need to be considered. Some of the problems are clearly computer problems. I have one case, that of a Mr. Alan Clarke—I could go on all day with such cases—where the problem was a simple computer error that took his child off the system. Could they reinstate the child? Could they hell. It took a year to resolve and the anguish that that gentleman had to suffer is unacceptable.

Finally, the suggestions that have been put forward today need to be taken on board. A more fundamental review, such as that referred to by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, needs to take place; otherwise, what should be a flagship policy of which we should all be proud will be further discredited. I fear that people will not apply for the benefit because they will feel that they may get into debt. If they have never been in debt in their life, they do not want to be led into it by Government and they should not be so led.

10.27 am

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on securing this important debate. I will make a brief contribution, focusing on two narrow issues, not because I do not have a lot of feelings about the merits of the system—I endorse my hon. Friend's comments—and not because I do not have a wide variety of experience of cases that have gone wrong, but because I want to drill it down to a couple of simple points.

I will refer to one case in particular—that of Christine Onion who lives in Shelton Lock, a suburb of Derby. She, like many people, changes job from time to time. She had the misfortune to change jobs at a time when the Inland Revenue was introducing the tax credit system at the beginning of 2003. Amazingly, her then employer is still shown as her employer on the Inland Revenue system. Indeed, it has been credited with a substantial amount of tax credits, supposedly paid direct to her through her employer even though she has not actually worked there for two and a half years. I cannot justify that level of incompetence.

I do not want to sound like a saint, but I deal personally with all tax credit concerns raised in my office. I have therefore developed quite a strong personal relationship with some of the people who come to me. In this instance, I will quote Christine, removing the name of the member of Inland Revenue staff who kindly phoned her on the last occasion. It is a large file, so I will not go through the full details. She says that the member of staff

"rang me last night and apparently the computer has reverted to all my old details and has me working at Merrill!!!!???? The technical support team still haven't fixed the technical problem. Call me daft"—

well, I do not—

"but I still think over nine months",

which was when she first heard about and identified the problem,

"to sort that out is excessive. Obviously,"

the man involved

"can't fix that so he's made me personal assurances that he's going to send me the right amount on the right days. They had got it wrong again. He's told me if there are any more problems to contact you."

That is a consistent message, and it is also a flattering one; Inland Revenue staff regularly say, "Please do contact Mark again if this goes wrong," which, regrettably, happens rather frequently.

There was a similar case. An overpayment was conceded—we won that one—and accepted in writing, but it has recently resurfaced on the computer. We thought we had cracked it, and the couple involved were thrilled about that, but they are now being troubled yet again with historical information that they thought they had cleared. The only way to prove that the overpayment was not a legitimate recovery item in that case was for me to go through the telephone log of all the calls made to the helpline and identify two calls that I had made in which I asked, "Are you sure this payment is correct, because the people involved do not believe it to be so?" and I was assured that it was. That was demonstrated after a long period—this matter was not, of course, resolved quickly. Eventually, the people involved received an assurance that that overpayment would not be recovered from them. They were honest people, as are most of my constituents who bring such cases to me; they had queried something that they had found strange straight away and they had expected the matter to be resolved, and I had also raised the matter on their behalf.

The management of the technology that supports the staff involved in this area has been woeful. I noted the statement made in the papers when the larger stories about the management of this system came up, in which it was said, "Oh, we have cracked the computer problems." That is simply untrue. I used to work in the IT sector, and I would be interested to know how many fixes remain to be addressed. I would also love to meet some of the people who have responsibility for managing this system, to discuss some of their processes with them.

I want to make one further narrow point. I have a women's refuge in my constituency—many other Members may have one in theirs, too—and I have found there to be particular problems in dealing with some issues related to it. People move into it rapidly, often in very strained circumstances, and they then move out rapidly as well, because such refuges are short-term residences. Those people's tax credit issues must be resolved within that short period. I noted the reference made by the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) to the interface with advice services; if the

[Mr. Mark Todd]

advice services do not have a quick way of contacting the Revenue and resolving matters, many such people can end up in tremendous distress. I have dealt with a number of cases in that refuge, and none of those experiences has been wholly satisfactory. The narrow point that I wish to make is that we must look at how we deal with people who, because of the strain of relationship breakdown and violence, move rapidly around the country to escape their problems. I am unsure whether we have a system that is flexible enough to respond to those particular circumstances.

10.33 am

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil) (LD): We have had an excellent debate on an issue that is incredibly important to people throughout the country, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on raising it and on the way in which he did so. He gave fair credit to the Government for the amount of money that has gone into tax credits, but he also raised legitimate concerns about the way in which the system has operated.

I have taken some reassurance from hearing the same criticisms that I have heard from my constituents echoed by Members of all parties. Before I became responsible for this issue as my party's spokesman on it, I raised it a number of times with the Paymaster General. She was always very constructive, but she was also inclined to lead me to the view that something odd must be going on in my constituency—that some aberrant individual was dealing with the south-western region.

Dawn Primarolo: That is not fair. The hon. Gentleman will remember that the repeated meetings and conversations I had with him about this matter were intended to find out whether any systemic issues could be drawn from his casework. That is the point that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) made, with regard to examining what Members of Parliament were saying to me and what that meant for the system, and I will return to that point. However, I never trivialised or tried to push away the points raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Laws: We have our own memories of those meetings. I am grateful that the Paymaster General took the time to meet me to address those matters, but I must say that when she did so she rather gave the impression that there were exceptional problems in my area. We have now heard from other Members, including Labour Members, and I hope that she will listen more closely to their experiences than she has to those of Members of other parties.

Astonishing figures were released last week, when Parliament was in recess. They revealed that 1,879,000 awards were overpaid, out of a total of 5.6 million, and that almost £2 billion was overpaid last year. Those astonishing figures underline not only the impact of these problems on individuals, but the extent of their impact. I agree with what the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) suggested; I am sure that the problems to do with tax credit that Members and those responsible for tax credit have picked up are only the tip of a very large iceberg.

The hon. Member for Nottingham, North—and, I think, the hon. Member for North Durham—made the point that these problems impact on individuals on very low incomes, for whom the effects of accumulating debt through tax credit payments are very serious. A number of Labour Members have commented that the Government have not received full credit for the huge expenditure that has gone into this project. I am sure that there are a number of reasons for that, but I will mention one of them; many of the people I see who are experiencing these problems with tax credits tell me that they wish they had never claimed them in the first place because although they were better off at the start they have now been forced into debt. That is a serious criticism of the Government's policy, and it comes from the very people whose lives it was designed to improve.

The other problem with the scheme is that it involves not only people who are vulnerable because they have a low income, but people whose circumstances typically frequently change; they might be in part-time work, or be receiving overtime payments, or take up a number of different jobs in a short period, and their family circumstances might also change. The Government's system is therefore inherently unstable and likely to lead to the type of overpayments and underpayments that we have heard about.

I welcome the seven-point plan laid out by the hon. Member for Nottingham, North, which is no doubt mentioned in his press release which is going out as we speak. I wish also to mention the one-point or two-point plan of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire to address more fundamental reform of the tax credit system, because I believe that some elements of the existing system can be tinkered with and that that will lead to important improvements; however, I do not know whether that will remove all the problems. I am sure that the Paymaster General will not give us undertakings about that today, but she ought to be willing to look at whether the system is inherently unstable and inherently likely to lead to huge overpayments and underpayments.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Laws: If the hon. Gentleman will excuse me, I will not, as there is little time left and I must leave enough time for the debate to be wound up and for the criticisms that have been made to be answered.

It is vital that the Paymaster General examines the system that we have, and whether there are inherent problems in it. Family credit was a fixed award, and of course there are problems with fixed awards, but, as we have learned, there are also problems with this system. The Paymaster General will be aware that a system that is rather similar to ours was introduced in Australia. Way back in February 2003, the Commonwealth ombudsman reported on the Australian scheme; at that time, 33 per cent. of the awards had been overpaid. That is almost the same figure that was reported last week by the Government. I do not have the time to list the Commonwealth ombudsman's criticisms of the Australian scheme, but they are precisely the same as those that are being made now of the British scheme.

The Paymaster General must look at the potential to go back to fixed awards. They were present not only in family credit under the previous Conservative

Government, but also in the working families tax credit when the current Government initially introduced the change. My first point is that there needs to be a more fundamental examination of the system. I agree with the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, and the hon. Members for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) and for North Durham.

My second point is that I entirely agree with the criticisms of this scheme and the award notices made by the hon. Member for Nottingham, North, and in particular with those about the difficulty of individuals getting a serious appraisal from the Inland Revenue of who has caused any error. If it is not reasonable to recover the amount, because the Inland Revenue has caused the problem or because the constituent could not reasonably have figured out for themselves that there was a problem, we should not recover the money from those individuals. I hope that the Paymaster General will acknowledge that that is a problem and take substantive measures to change it, not simply change the design of the forms.

I shall not go through all the points that the hon. Member for Nottingham, North made, but I welcome them all.

I shall make my final point, as I am conscious of the limited time left, and we must leave the Paymaster General and the Conservative spokesman enough time to make their comments. The figures released last week were for 2003–04, so I would be grateful if the Paymaster General updated us on the current situation—whether the overpayments in the year 2004–05 are likely to be as significant, and what percentage of awards continue to be inaccurate.

We are talking about the expenditure—whether deliberate or not—of almost £14 billion of taxpayers' money on one of the most important schemes that Labour Governments have introduced since 1997. One reason why the Government have not received political credit for the scale of that expenditure is that major parts of the system are not working. The Paymaster General must take that seriously and address the problem.

10.41 am

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), who is a fine and thoughtful parliamentarian. He has made some constructive suggestions, such as his call for major consideration of the reform of the whole system—a point that was taken up most effectively by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young). However, there was an almost Mandelsonian quality to the hon. Gentleman's comments about the good works that the Government have undertaken, which I thought were a little over the top.

Whatever the worthy objectives of the tax credit system, there is no doubt that it has its weaknesses—we all recognise that, and this morning several hon. Members gave examples of problems. We know from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that household incomes, after tax and benefits, have fallen over the past two tax years. As the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) accurately put it, for many families tax credits are not pin money, so this is a serious issue.

I was pleased to note that two key New Labour thinkers, Anthony Giddens and Patrick Diamond, have done some work on the matter. The whole philosophy behind the implementation of tax credits is a benefit system—this is what they say—that relies more and more on means-testing and complicated tax credits. Since October 1999 the Government have introduced, on average, a new tax credit for families every six months. That is part of the difficulty. We have heard about the implications of that through the examples that have been given this morning.

Whatever the cause, there have undoubtedly been problems. There have been newspaper reports about fraudsters targeting tax credits using identity theft. Apparently, taxation experts have said that Inland Revenue staff are struggling to cope and that helpline staff are not trained to handle inquiries. Given the huge sums of money involved, will the Paymaster General tell us what is being done to address the threat of fraud, which is now quite serious?

We are aware of the terrible difficulties that have been faced by constituents who have received overpayments: when the Revenue decided that mistakes had been made, it recalled overpayments, causing people financial hardship and mental anguish. That has happened in my constituency.

It is extraordinary that in April and May 2003 there were overpayments to 455,000 households, which totalled £94 million. As the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) said, there have been total mispayments of £2 billion. This is a staggering situation for the Government to be in, and it needs to be addressed. We have heard complaints and suggested solutions from the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, Barnardo's and the Child Poverty Action Group. In Northern Ireland there has been special criticism of the system.

I know that the Paymaster General needs a substantial amount of time in which to sum up. In April, I asked the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is now the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, whether the alarming reports, about which we have heard this morning, were true that Revenue officials were being ordered to get tough with those who had been paid more than they were due, even when—as was reported in *The Guardian*—that was

"as a result of errors by officials or a computer glitch."

Will the Paymaster General clarify whether the reports are accurate? This is an important matter of public trust. In the last debate, her colleague also told us that he expected to clear the backlog of overpayments by the summer. Is that target still on schedule?

I very much welcome the Paymaster General's written statement of 26 May, which is a clear admission that the system has flaws. I welcome also the fact that she is talking about a code of practice that is certainly fairer. But the sixth measure promised in the written statement states:

"HMRC will review the operation of the code of practice on over-payments."

The statement goes on to say that

"the Department will ensure that in cases of genuine hardship where the recovery of an over-payment is disputed, recovery can be suspended while the dispute is resolved."

Is that now happening?

[Mr. Richard Spring]

The first three measures proposed by the Government relate to the provision of better information to claimants. I hope that they can give us some assurance that that is now happening.

Will the Paymaster General also comment on the provision of better information to the public and taxpayers about the success of tax credits? As far as I am aware, the Revenue and Customs and Excise have delayed for several months the publication of official figures detailing how and why errors are made, claiming that the figures need further analysis. I understand that they are due to be published before the end of the year. Is that still the intention?

Obviously, the IT systems are at the heart of the problem. How efficacious does the Paymaster General think they now are? There has been huge difficulty with them, which needs to be resolved.

We return to a fundamental point. Despite what the written statement says, the Paymaster General has heard this morning about a continuing series of painful and tragic glitches. Building on the points constructively made by the hon. Member for Nottingham, North, and taking up the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire, I must say that this issue seems to be one in which good intentions have turned to ill and that the Government need to review the matter fundamentally.

10.47 am

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on his fair and balanced introduction to the debate, and I congratulate hon. Members from all parties who have spoken. In the brief time available, I want to address context, what needs to be done, and the point made by the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) about whether there is a systemic issue.

First, I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North that the success of tax credits is not confined to Nottingham, North. Over 6 million families benefit from tax credits. That is around 20 million people, including 10 million children. Four in 10 families pay no net tax as a result of tax credits. By October 2005, in real terms, families with children in the poorest fifth of the population will be, on average, £3,200 a year better off than they were in 1997. The take-up in the first year of tax credits was 80 per cent., and that number rises every year, despite the misgivings that some hon. Members have expressed today about the implications of errors in individual cases. The tax credit system contributes to a substantial reduction in child poverty.

I stress to hon. Members that the policy is the result of a long consultation with the voluntary and community sector, including citizens advice bureaux, and extensive consultation on the balance between fixed awards and responsive awards and what needed to be done. We are picking up that theme again today.

Hon. Members have talked about individual constituents who have experienced extreme difficulties with their tax credit payments. I have always recognised that there are still issues to be ironed out and problems that need to be addressed. I am frankly appalled to hear that cases that my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) raised on 6 April have still not been dealt with. Clearly, I need to pursue that. It gives me no comfort to continue to tell Members that they can come direct to me with cases. I have a huge motivation to ensure that the issues are dealt with rapidly.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) raised some strategic and systemic points. It is important that we understand what the figures for 2003–04 show as we make decisions. Of course, I fully recognise that problems still exist, and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, now the Financial Secretary, said as much in his comments of 6 April. I took the first opportunity to reinforce that message in this new Parliament with my statement of 26 May, and I shall take this chance to elaborate on that and respond to the right hon. Gentleman's point.

Perhaps it would be helpful to start by underpinning the point about the flexibility of the tax credit system, and to say how it is designed to work. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) referred to the need for flexibility, but of course there is a trade-off; flexibility brings more fairness, but it also brings more complexity. Fixed awards are unfair and unresponsive and would not make the contribution that the system currently does. We have to get the balance right and find a position between those two poles. The flexibility enables families to get more money when they require it, and they notify us of that.

The flexibility of the tax credit system mirrors that of the tax system, and it is based on an annual reward. If changes in income or circumstances during the year are not taken into account, that will be reflected in the tax credit award for the year. That places a responsibility on Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to make sure that when it is informed of changes, changes are made to the tax credit award. However, it also places a responsibility on claimants to notify HMRC of changes.

What does current information tell us about overpayments? Two thirds of the total overpayment figure is due to rises in family income, and nearly £1 billion of that is due to increases in income of more than £10,000 in a year. In such cases, HMRC was notified of that not during the year but at the end of the year for the reconciliation process. Where that occurs, the income range is £20,000 to £30,000 per annum. Clearly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North points out, there is an issue as to whether claimants appreciate the fact that under the new system HMRC must be notified of changes in-year, and as to whether that message is reinforced enough. However, that is not a mistake of the system, officials, or the computer, and it accounts for the lion's share of problems.

Half of overpayments are less than £570; they are not the £1,000 that people keep quoting. A significant number of overpayments are less than £50. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire pointed out, we need to look again at the interaction between change in circumstances and change in income, and we need to consider whether people are being notified of that properly.

I am the first to admit that the IT system—I do not need to remind the House of this—experienced well-publicised administrative problems in its early days. A proportion of the overpayments that hon. Members have mentioned this morning reflect that fact. And of course there are additional issues; HMRC staff have on occasion made mistakes in processing, leading to overpayment. We need to make sure that we get that right, and a great deal of work has been done on the matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North raised seven points. They fall broadly into the categories in my statement. HMRC must encourage people to notify it of in-year income changes and should make that clear on the statement. It must find ways to reinforce that message through the year, and that is precisely what my statement of 26 May said. The award notices need to be clearer, especially on the obligations. Again, my statement of 26 May addressed precisely that point.

We have held a long consultation with the voluntary and community sector; that is coming to a conclusion. HMRC must make sure that the helpline can track changes, that was another point. It must make sure that the complete history of a case can be seen. It should make sure that changes can be made when the claimant rings in, so that we do not have to go in and out of the system all the time.

I should remind everyone in the House that all conversations with the helpline are recorded, so we can go back and hear what was said and whether the system was notified. We do that on a case-by-case basis in order to give a fair judgment when challenged on overpayment. That is in addition to providing the paper response. Citizens advice bureaux have a direct number to a single location and do not have to use the helpline, and that is the case for Members of Parliament and advice-giving agencies, too. That is in my statement.

On notification of overpayments, in my statement I made it clear that I am in absolute agreement with my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North that there should be notification before recovery, and that there should be negotiation, time to resolve cases and suspended repayment. On clearer recovery processes, we have set repayment rates—minimum, intermediate and maximum—but all those things need to be considered.

My hon. Friend's final point was on the streamlining of the process, and the time that the processes takes. I agree with hon. Members that it is unacceptable that these cases are taking so long to rectify. There is a long tail in the system from the original problems, and that needs to be dealt with. We should look at the figures and the information. By the second year of the scheme, there were 6.1 million families on tax credits; that has risen from 5.7 million in the first year. That does not suggest that families are recoiling from the system or deciding not to apply for tax credit. We have to look at what the figures tell us, and see what that means for the system.

I am perfectly happy to engage in debate about whether we should have a fixed system or a responsive system as an interesting exercise in this House, but every single assessment from the anti-poverty lobby demonstrates that responsiveness is the way to continue to tackle child poverty in our society.

I have tried to pick up on the seven points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North, and I have tried to show how I believe they are covered, although he elaborated on them in much more detail than I was able to in my written statement. We need to take them forward under the broad three categories. The first is consultation with the voluntary sector; we need to review the effectiveness of the information given to claimants and support them in understanding the responsive nature of the system. We should work closely with the voluntary and community sector, reducing the risk of overpayment.

Secondly, we need to look at new methods for reminding new tax credits claimants of the importance of providing up-to-date information on in-year changes. The Department has to come up with proposals as to how we can take that forward. Finally, we have to review the operation of the code of practice on overpayments. It has to meet the commitment given by the executive chairman of HMRC to the Public Accounts Committee in January 2005, and ensure that in genuine cases of hardship, where recovery of overpayment is disputed, repayment is suspended while that dispute is resolved.

Mr. Allen: The Minister is generous in giving way, particularly so late in her contribution. She has been extremely helpful in her reply.

Rather than have another such debate in a few months' time, would the Minister consider meeting me and others who contributed this morning in, say, three or four months to review what progress we have made?

Dawn Primarolo: I am more than happy to agree to that, if my hon. Friend wishes to facilitate such a meeting. It is not for me to indicate when Members should decide that they would like an Adjournment debate on a subject; as a Minister, I always stand ready to respond to debates, as long as they are on a subject that comes under my policy area.

In conclusion, I have tried to deal quickly with a number of issues raised by hon. Members. They are important issues, and I look forward to resolving them.

2012 Olympic Bid

11 am

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I am pleased to have been granted this debate by Mr. Speaker; I could not have organised the timing better myself. I am grateful to colleagues from all parties and to the Minister for being here. I intend this to be a thoroughly positive occasion, because it is right that the House, at this stage, following yesterday's evaluation committee report, comes together to say what huge benefits there will be for Britain if we win the Olympic bid in Singapore next month.

Although I do not intend in any way to be unkind, I hazard that unlike you, Mr. Benton, I was not alive when London last hosted an Olympic games. There are some colleagues in the House, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), himself an Olympian, who were alive then. I remember from an early age being excited by the Rome Olympics in 1960 and thereafter at every four-yearly interval. Having been enthusiastic about sport in general, and especially the Olympics and the Commonwealth games, I am aware that the Olympic movement can bring a transformation to the city and the country that hosts the games. I was lucky enough to be in Barcelona for a couple of days last week. Barcelona was transformed by the Olympic games, as Munich was, as Rome was before it, and as cities outside Europe have been.

The other thing on which I reflected as I prepared for today's debate, was that there need be no doubt in anybody's mind that Britain can deliver successful sporting events. The old Empire games are now the Commonwealth games, the most recent of which in Manchester was a huge success and a wonderful event that I attended on several occasions. There are other events in most peoples' memories, such as the World cup in 1966, or regular events, such as the annual Wimbledon fortnight, the test matches and FA cup finals. I have been privileged to attend the past two cup finals in Cardiff—last year as a Millwall supporter and this year also as a Millwall supporter, although the team was not there. The London marathon passes through my constituency every year and some 60,000 people line the streets watching it.

When the Olympic bid was discussed, people were worried about whether there would be public support. The British may not enthusiastically say at the beginning that they will support something, but when the moment draws near they appear and are thoroughly enthusiastic. There is no doubt in my mind that if we win the bid, it will be a hugely popular and supported event. The projections for ticket sales, which have been accepted by the evaluation committee, are already well over 80 per cent. and I believe that we could do better than that.

This has been a two-year process as the bid has gathered momentum. There was a debate in Parliament in January 2003, and in May 2003 the Government announced their welcome commitment; then there was a fantastic launch in January 2004, which I, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) and others were privileged to attend. The selection for the shortlist happened just over a year ago and the welcome appointment of our colleague, Lord Coe, to the position of chairman took place the day after that. Then there was the successful presentation of our bid documents, the good visit in February of the evaluation committee and, yesterday, the confirmation that the report says that we have all our ducks in a row. The report did not just say that; it said some extremely positive things indeed and I will presently select some parts of that document that seem not just to tick a box, but say that this is very good news.

I take this opportunity to thank those who have been involved. This is a huge effort and consistent commitment has been shown by a large group of people. I apologise to those whom I will, inevitably, miss out. I give my thanks and gratitude on behalf of many to the Government—the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister for Sport and Tourism—who have given unqualified support and enthusiasm, without which we would not have been able to make progress. Colleagues who speak for their parties on this issue, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bath, have been equally supportive all the way through the process, and that is important.

Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, has made it clear that this was something that could deliver benefits for London. I am grateful for that: it was not a matter of party difference when we had the mayoral elections last year—nor should it have been.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I should be interested to know in what way the hon. Gentleman thinks that London has benefited so far. What gains have we had via this process? I know that the Mayor speaks highly of his links with the Labour Government, but have there been any deliverable gains and any real sense of a commitment from the Government, or has it simply been a matter of words rather than delivery?

Simon Hughes: It is not for me to act as a Government spokesman, but I can mention things that have happened that might not have happened, mainly in transport. The East London line extension decision has been made, which will link part of the infrastructure. That would not necessarily have happened, although it is a necessary part of the equation. The commitment to finish the cross-channel rail link on time, which predated the Olympic bid, will be a huge bonus in terms of bringing people in and out of the Olympic site. Most recently, there has been a general commitment to improve the transport infrastructure; that has been a collaborative effort and is the one thing on which the evaluation committee notes that a lot of recent progress has been made.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's direct question, the report said that there had been a lot of extra, pre-legacy work to which the Olympic bid had given momentum—the bid had been a driver and given additional reason for action. He and I know, as London MPs, that often we talk about London plans, such as Crossrail, that are in the far distance. I honestly believe that the bid has been an incentive for things to move much more quickly in planning and infrastructure and has required the Government, London government and other agencies to sing from the same song sheet. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to pursue those matters.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hughes: Of course, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me to finish my thanks.

The British Olympic Association—Craig Reedie and his team—and the bid team under Seb Coe are to be thanked, but five principal sponsors have also ensured that it has been possible and it would be unfair not to mention them as partners. They are EDF Energy, British Airways, BT, Virgin Atlantic and Accenture.

Mr. Benton, you will know that to get this operation on the road and funded means that there has to be collaboration with the private sector, groups, public authorities, Government and local government, individuals and this place. I am convinced that that has, in recent months, been moving in the right direction.

Mr. Love: I apologise, Mr. Benton, for arriving just a few seconds late.

The acid test in terms of London's commitment to the Olympic bid, should it be successful, will be that London will make a major contribution to the cost of the Olympics. Does the hon. Gentleman support that and support Ken Livingstone's view that the council tax payer in London should make that contribution?

Simon Hughes: I have always supported that view and have defended it. How to meet the cost of a city bid that is also a national bid will always be a difficult question. I have said unequivocally that additional benefits will come to London in terms of legacy, venues and accessibility of venues to people in this city. Although many places around the country will benefit—I was talking yesterday to my friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) about Loughborough, which will be a training venue if our bid is successful—London will benefit more and should, rightly, make a contribution.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman understand the reasons why the London bid is less popular in Scotland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom and does he understand the perception that Scotland seems to be paying for these games and for the infrastructure in London? It is estimated that £70 million could be lost to Scotland in good causes and grass-roots sport. What has he to say about that?

Simon Hughes: I shall deal with that quickly in three ways. First, I have seen the figures on support in Scotland and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath confirms, they are not lower than in the rest of the country—on the objective evidence, that is not the case.

Secondly, history shows that just because one part of the country is a venue for games, that does not mean that other parts of the country do not enjoy them. I remember that the Edinburgh Commonwealth games were supported by people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We went to Edinburgh and enjoyed them, and they were a great event for the city; my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) is here. Thirdly, the legacy of the games will be everywhere, and the events will be everywhere. For example, the football competition will take place in Scotland and Wales as well as in the north, midlands and south of England.

I cannot believe that when somebody who happens to come from the north-west wins a world boxing title, the rest of us do not share in the delight, nor that when a young 17-year-old gets a silver medal as a boxer in the Olympics, we do not all celebrate. I cannot believe that when Kelly Holmes won a gold medal, people in Northern Ireland did not share in the rejoicing because she comes from Kent. That is not how this country works, thank goodness.

We should always be slightly less selfish. Of course, the games will cost something; the costs stack up, but we have to look at the benefits. One of the great benefits will be that the games will inspire lots of people to levels of sporting achievement and development that they would never otherwise have attained. The other day, Daley Thompson launched the schools pack in Tower Bridge primary school, on my patch. Those who are now 11 years old could be performing in the Olympics by the time that the games come to London. If a person knows that they may get a place in their national squad for something, that is a phenomenal incentive.

We have just appointed a new head teacher at St. James's Church of England primary school, Bermondsey, of which I am chair of the board of governors. Her son is in the sailing squad and I hope that he will encourage an interest in sailing among the children there. Those children may think, "Yes, I can sail for Britain and for team GB." That is a huge benefit, and Scots, Northern Irish, Welsh and English citizens of all backgrounds will enjoy it too.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): I hope that neither my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) nor others in the Chamber will form the view that there is anything less than support in Scotland for a national bid on behalf of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for games that happen to be located in London, the capital city of that same United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend puts his finger on a very important point. The opportunity to represent one's country in an Olympic games held in that country has in the past proved an enormous motivation for many people to reach the standard necessary to be able to compete. In addition, as my hon. Friend rightly points out, the Olympic games give an enormous motivation and stimulus to many people to take up and become engaged in sport.

Simon Hughes: Nobody speaks in this House with more authority than my right hon. and learned Friend on that subject.

We have great debates about young people, disorder and antisocial behaviour. There is a very simple remedy for a lot of antisocial behaviour. We need to give young people positive things to do as an alternative. The more swimming, sport and physically demanding activity that uses energy there is, and the more motivation such

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young people have to achieve something, the more likely it is that they will not be distracted by other things as they grow up.

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD) *rose—*

Simon Hughes: I shall give way one more time; then I must make progress so that others can speak.

John Barrett: I wholeheartedly echo the points made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell). However, a lesson can be learned from the Greece Olympics. Far-flung regions of that country feared that, as Athens was seen to be the place where the action was and where all transport links would be headed, they would lose out on tourism. Such regions thought that people might be tempted to avoid Greece because of a fear that the transport links would not be able to cope.

Can London learn something from that, so that people who come to the United Kingdom during the Olympics are not put off from going to regions other than the games venues for other reasons?

Simon Hughes: My hon. Friend has family links with Greece and knows much more about Greek issues than I do. However, all the evidence and predictions—I hope that the Minister will confirm this—show that people will come as visitors and not stay in London all the time, although London has the capacity to accommodate them. Hockey fans would come for the hockey competition and might then go to Scotland for a holiday. Yachting or sailing fans would go to Weymouth, but might want to come to London on their way in or out.

There are all sorts of reasons why the rest of Britain should benefit. All the evidence is that the games would be good for tourism, jobs and business—and not only in the tourism and catering industries—as well as for sport and sport development. I am sure that that is the case. When the Commonwealth games were in Manchester, not only Manchester benefited. I am sure that the same will apply for these games.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) has already made brief mention of our conversation, but I should like to confirm the point. We often talk about the north-south divide and Scotland, but the one place that always gets missed out is the east midlands. Loughborough is the sporting capital of the United Kingdom, and has been the sporting capital of the world on many occasions.

The Chinese have already looked at the facilities at Loughborough university, and although they have not finalised everything, they have indicated that they will probably base themselves at a university such as Loughborough—

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Or Bath.

Mr. Reed: Indeed, or Bath.

Mr. Foster: Thank you.

Mr. Reed: Those universities are coming on strongly these days. Does the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey recognise that the issue is about not only the immediate holding camp but the investment that goes into the infrastructure? The Chinese would spend money in Loughborough and would probably be there for a month or so before and afterwards. The enormous benefit would be economic and social, but also sporting.

Simon Hughes: I accept that entirely. I have seen some of the sports teaching and coaching at Loughborough and I have been to Bath as well. They are already good centres, and their reputations and skill in what they do will be enhanced by those opportunities. The games must be seen as an opportunity for many parts of Britain other than London and other areas that are to host the events.

Let me highlight the really positive extra things—the super-positive things—that came out of the report. First, the location of the Olympic village is hugely convenient: 49 per cent. of athletes will compete very near to where they will be living, and that has not been the case at many previous Olympic games.

Secondly, we are very clear on the environmental issues. There will be a huge environmental benefit. One of the great, appealing things about the bid is how the environmental legacy has been thought through. In our age, we are concerned about such things; that legacy has to have an environmental priority, and it is right that it should. The evaluation people make it clear, that our air quality will have met the relevant standards in good time for 2012, that the whole planning operation will have minimum impact and maximum sustainability and that there will be very positive environmental legacies.

Thirdly, the evaluation people are clear that the budget works; they say that the budgeting process is detailed and meticulous, and that the assumptions are well supported and documented. Fourthly, they are clear that the ticketing revenue estimates—both for the Olympics and Paralympics—are very good. I indicated the figures; the predictions are of more than 80 per cent. sales for the Olympics and more than 60 per cent. sales for the Paralympics already.

The fifth point is really important for London. Lee valley has desperately needed regeneration for ages and is the one bit of London to have missed out on all the boom and benefit. The games will transform what has been a grim part of London. Yes, of course there will be difficulty for some businesses, which will have to be relocated. However, creating a great new park with all the facilities must be a huge benefit to a part of London that will have many more people and much more activity in the years to come. Sixthly, nearly two thirds of the venues for the games already exist or are already under construction and planning, irrespective of the games. It is not as if we are a long way behind and scrambling to catch up. Wembley stadium, for example, is well on the way to being completed.

Seventhly, the evaluation people make the point that places such as Wimbledon, Eton and the new Wembley arena are iconic venues for sport—let alone places near this House, such as Hyde park and Horseguards parade. There are some very clever, imaginative ideas that are not about going to the traditional venues. Greenwich

park would be a fantastic venue for equestrian events. The Dome, at last, has found a use, for which some of us are grateful.

Sir Menzies Campbell: So that is what this is about.

Simon Hughes: It is an additional bonus.

The Paralympic competitors are now a very important part of the games. They say that 95 per cent. of them will be in accommodation within 15 minutes of where they will perform. That will be a symbol of an accessible London—not only in 2012 but afterwards. There will be enough beds and rooms, and they will be near where people will be performing. The health service passes the test, although we can come back to some of the other debates about the health service later. There is already sufficient hotel accommodation.

What is really important—I say this to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field)—is that we now have one of the best transport access systems in the world. If one considers the centrality of Heathrow airport and then adds in the other airports—Gatwick, Stansted and City of London—and the cross-channel rail link, one realises that the games will be hugely accessible for people coming in from across Europe or by air. Finally, the rail infrastructure is now in place.

Public support is growing. In a speech, which I commend, to the Olympic organising committee in January, the Secretary of State set out in summary the reasons why the games would be so good for Britain—much new employment and business, increasing participation in sport and renewed enthusiasm and pride in our country.

London is the most cosmopolitan city on Earth; there are more Chinese here than in any city outside China and more Africans than anywhere outside Africa. A growing Latin American community participates in the life of London. It is a great Commonwealth city. People with different languages, backgrounds, faiths and cultures are naturally here. By definition, we are part of Europe; we have people here not just from the traditional nearer European nations but from eastern Europe. If people want a place where athletes from 200 countries will feel at home, London is now it. If people want a place that can demonstrate how sport transcends all the cultural divides, London is it. I hope that all those things will be taken into account by the International Olympic Committee members when they meet in Singapore. We can hold the Olympics very well as a human event and as a sporting spectacle.

There is a job to do, and I leave it to the Minister to say how we can all help the bid. There are suggestions about how parliamentarians, businesses and individuals can help in the last four weeks of the bid process. I guess that the most direct way is by bumping into members of the IOC—providing the rules are followed—as it would be most useful to persuade them. I am sure that we can do it. The press today are very positive and I thank them.

One of the brochures that came out had on the front three words to celebrate and promote the bid—"passion", "pride" and "commitment". Its introduction stated:

"Our combination of world-class venues and iconic city centre locations would ensure an exceptional setting for every event."

We have been marked as having passed the test technically. I want this debate to be an indication that we are emotionally, spiritually and politically committed in a way that we have never been before. The momentum is moving in our direction. None of us knows whether we will succeed in July, but we believe, and we want the Olympic committee to believe, that we are ready to take the job on and that we will do the committee proud.

I end with a quote that I remember vaguely from my youth. When Baron de Coubertin started the first modern Olympic games, he described the motif and the reason for the Olympics as this:

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

If one gets to the Olympics, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife would probably tell people, one wants to take part but it is also very helpful if one can win. While we are in the bid stage, the de Coubertin quote does not really apply. The most important thing is to do everything we can to win the bid and I am here with colleagues to ensure that it is known that the British Parliament—across parties—takes that view. I wish all those involved every success in the four weeks ahead.

11.23 am

Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) not only on securing the debate but, as he said, on its timing. May I just allay the fears of those who live in Scotland and might be nervous by giving one or two quotes from Scottish people? Shirley Robertson, a double Olympic gold medallist, said:

"A home Olympic Games is the stuff of dreams. When I go back to Scotland people say, 'What about us", but it really would benefit the nation".

Jack McConnell said:

"Winning the Games in 2012 will make sure that the Olympic spirit touches every part of the United Kingdom".

So it will.

The United Kingdom has a unique and rich tradition in sport and in the Olympics. In the 19th century, we gave the world tennis, soccer, rugby, cricket and even skiing. De Coubertin came here in 1892–93 to look at sport in this country because he thought that we had a lesson for the world. He came to Harrow and Rugby and saw competitive sport not between public schools but inside them. He thought that the best thing that could happen would be a world team championships. It is slightly ironic that the Olympics was never set out to be a team championships, but it is gradually getting there one way or another.

We must not forget that, although we think we created all the world's sports, France also has a rich history. It gave us the Olympic games, and the Jules Rimet trophy and world soccer tournament. They are two of the most outstanding sporting contributions that France has made. We are not just up against Paris; we are up against a huge French tradition in sport, which we sometimes forget. We had our first games in White City in 1908. France had its first games in 1900. We had

[Derek Wyatt]

our second games in 1948 and France had its in the chariots of fire Olympics in Paris in 1924. We are bidding for our third Olympics, as is Paris. That is an interesting parallel.

The Minister for Sport and Tourism (Mr. Richard Caborn): In 1908 and 1948, the Olympic committee came to London and said, "Will you run the games?" This is the first time that London has made a bid. In terms of the Olympic movement, we have delivered in the past.

Derek Wyatt: I thank the Minister for that intervention. I shall not say that he has trumped my next paragraph, but I was about to say that before 1908 Vesuvius erupted and the Olympic games had to be moved from Rome to London. Nobody bid in 1948 and we offered and saved the games, because they would have been lost. We have a fantastic opportunity not only to give the games back to the country, but to do something else—develop the games for the 21st century. A lot has been said about attitude, facilities and regeneration, but there should be something about what we expect the spirit of the Olympics to be in the 21st century. I will mention that later.

In the marathon, the reason why there was a need to go around the track after 26 gruelling miles is not that we wanted to celebrate some fantastic finish for Sky Sports or the BBC, but that the Queen wanted to be under the tarpaulin so that the sun's heat did not affect her. It had to be constructed near the finishing line, which is why there is extra yardage. In White City in 1908, we had a swimming pool in the middle, which was frozen, and the skating was done there. That triggered the development of the winter Olympic sports.

We have a huge sporting legacy that we have given the world. A magnificent film was made of the 1948 Olympics. It was shot on nitrate and was wasting away in the British Film Institute library. It was saved by Taylor Downing and one or two others and has now been redone on digital. I hope that the Minister can persuade BBC3 or BBC4 to show it. It has never been shown on TV. It is a remarkable film about the groups of people; after all, it was the first time that the Russians had ever come. They did not participate in 1948, but given the cold war that had developed and the Berlin airlift, it was quite remarkable that they came. It would be a wonderful thing and a celebration to show the film on British television. It is remarkable because it shows a young man who was leading the British team out. The only thing was that he had forgotten the flag, which was in his car in the car park. That young man was Roger Bannister. There are many bits of history in the film that I think people would enjoy.

Mr. Caborn: That was the first time that any Olympics had been televised, and it was done by the BBC. The 1948 games are historic in that sense. They were shown to the world via television, live, for the first time.

Derek Wyatt: A history lesson is developing here.

In the Athens games, the BBC won accolades all over the world for its coverage, and rightly so. It was spectacular and we congratulate the BBC on it.

The other thing in de Coubertin's mind when he created the Olympics was that it was going to be not just a physical games, but a spiritual and artistic games. Gold medals were given for literature and poetry. That has fallen off substantially, and I hope that in our bid we will look back again and consider whether it is appropriate to give a gold medal for poetry, music, digital media or something else creative; after all, a Nobel prize is given for literature. Why should those things not return and why should we not develop the idea in a way that has not happened in the past?

Yesterday's report was excellent for London, given where we were two years ago or a year ago. However, I agree with Mihir Bose, who said in *The Daily Telegraph* that we must be careful. The decision is not just between Paris and London, but between three cities: Paris, London and Madrid. I think that London and Madrid are the most outstanding in terms of regeneration, and if the International Olympic Committee is serious that that is the principal criterion on which it will judge the bid, there is no question in my mind but that those cities are the leaders and that Paris is not.

I commend the team that put the bid together. I will start with the Prime Minister, because what he did in Athens was simply outstanding. One could not see what he was doing, but he attended a number of lunches, dinners and meetings, as the Minister will confirm. The Prime Minister's terrific interest has continued subsequently, and not just because his wife is an ambassador. He has never said so in public and I do not want to put words in his mouth, but I believe that the opening ceremony blew his mind when he saw the coming together. I was at the opening of the Commonwealth games in Manchester and it brought tears to the eyes. It was amazing to see a fellowship of people from all over the world. I say this whenever there is a sports debate, but we must remember that there are more countries on the IOC than members of the United Nations, and that says something about the spirit of mankind.

Since Lord Coe has taken over as chair of the London bid, it has improved tenfold or fifteenfold. Keith Mills, Mike Lee and Alan Pascoe have also done outstanding work. We do not have a big bid team and that is wise. The excellence of the team is obvious and we should commend it. I single out Seb Coe. It was a surprise when he was appointed—if it was so obvious, why did we not appoint him in the first place? He has done really well. He has managed the bid imaginatively and has put together a good team. I am slightly nervous about what we will do with him if we do not win the bid, and I wonder whether the Minister has thought of making him head of UK Sport, because he would do an outstanding job.

I want to ask two questions: what if we won and what if we did not win? If we won, it would be great if the opening ceremony, attended by 300,000 people, could be in the Mall instead of in a stadium. The ceremony could be a celebration. It could link all the cities that have held previous Olympic games. They could again have an opening ceremony so that a fellowship of Olympic cities could be developed.. That could be a 21st century model.

Main stadiums are built only for the opening and closing ceremonies, and that is a concern. Joseph Paxton designed the great exhibition in Hyde park in 1851 so

that the Crystal palace could be taken down bolt by bolt. Every bolt was numbered, and the palace was subsequently rebuilt in Sydenham. It is not true that modern stadiums cannot be designed to be taken down. The cost of the Athens Olympics was phenomenal. Weight-lifting competitions took place in a building that can be used only for weight-lifting and for nothing else. We do not want that and we may be able to use a modern IKEA approach to building stadiums, similar to that used by Joseph Paxton in 1951.

Can the Minister tell us whether an audit has been carried out in each local authority throughout the United Kingdom for Olympic sport and its needs? My constituency in Kent has the largest local authority, and I doubt whether we have three facilities that are even close to Olympic standard for sailing or athletics. We should have many more Olympic facilities and I wonder whether our bid could be a spur to creating and developing more Olympic facilities throughout Great Britain.

I make a plea for my constituency of Sittingbourne and Sheppey. We like to think that we have the best windsurfing in the world and would like to attract windsurfing teams from around the world, but that would need a lot of help and thought. When we have won the 2012 bid, I hope that a team will be set up to help us to get the windsurfing and sailing events, because that is what we would like.

Hundreds of specialist schools for sport are being built and developed. Perhaps the Minister will explain how they will fit in with the Olympic system and whether they will have some Olympic responsibility in their communities for developing sports so that the whole United Kingdom is connected to that.

Simon Hughes: One idea that was suggested to me and which I support is that every primary school should have a sports coach whose job is to introduce professionalism and to ensure that what they have is linked to what is outside. Does that fit in with the hon. Gentleman's view of how sport is developed in schools in his constituency and the rest of the country?

Derek Wyatt: As the hon. Gentleman said earlier, the bid will act as a spur and I am sure that there will be more coaching. I have a difference of opinion about how that will be done. We have such good coaching in rugby, soccer, cricket and tennis, and perhaps the organisations providing that coaching should be used instead of PE teachers. We must resolve the tension and that is the way to do it.

I hope that when we next debate the matter after winning the bid, the current Minister for Sport and Tourism might be the Minister for the Olympics. What Australia did was right. It had a federal Minister for the Olympics in Sydney and a Commonwealth Minister in Canberra. It is important to have a committed Minister for the Olympics, although I leave it to the Prime Minister to decide whether that Minister should be in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. There should also be a Secretary of State for sport, health education and young people, but that is another matter.

Turning to the more difficult question, what would happen if we did not win? I initiated Canterbury's bid to be cultural capital of Europe, although Liverpool won. Following that and the Toxteth riots of the 1980s came a new Liverpool. Another depressed area was Canary Wharf, where the old docks were run down and miserable. One man's vision hit both those areas, because Lord Heseltine saw the potential of Liverpool and Canary Wharf. We need some of that vision if we are not to lose the Olympic bid. Imagine how the nation would feel if we came second and how disappointed we would be.

Will the Minister reflect on how great it would be to have a global competition for a sports city in the east end of London? The Thames Gateway has substantial plans to help to regenerate the east end, but it would be wonderful if we could do it anyway. Let us go for a sports city. London needs it and the United Kingdom needs it, and it would be wonderful after the disappointment of Wembley, Picketts Lock and so on. What about a great exhibition of sport for 2012? What about a sporting capital of Europe challenge? We have no sports museum in this country and no central sports archive for film. Here is a chance to put those into the loop of making a sports city work.

I chair the all-party group on the Olympics. In the next day or two, all right hon. and hon. Members will receive a copy of the document "Backing the Bid". On 22 June, we will say good luck and goodbye to the bid team before it goes to Singapore, and on 23 June, we will be looking at the design and innovations of the bid. Those two events will take place in the House.

Several Hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Joe Benton (in the Chair): Order. Three hon. Members are standing and I propose to start the wind-up at 12 o'clock, so perhaps hon. Members would be as brief as possible.

11.38 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I appreciate that it may be unfashionable to be anything other than wholeheartedly in support of the bid, but I am a sceptical individual and am always cynical when I hear politicians parroting a single line. Much as I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on introducing the debate and salute the hard work of Lord Coe and his team over the past two years, I want to espouse one or two of the objections that have been made. A significant if silent minority of 32 per cent. of Londoners have concerns about the Olympics being held in our capital city.

Simon Hughes: The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but that was the figure at the beginning of the year. The latest figures show that support in the country and London is now around 80 per cent. or just under.

Mr. Field: I am happy to stand corrected, although the hon. Gentleman would be the first to admit that on 5 May his party managed to obtain 20 or 22 per cent. of the vote, which is a significant and equivalent minority. I am not suggesting that all Liberal Democrat voters are against the Olympic games here in the capital, but it is important to put some of these matters on the record.

[Mr. Field]

I am a passionate sports fan; I love sport and I love the idea of the Olympics coming here. I am always very supportive of British sporting endeavours, particularly in cricket and soccer, but also in athletics and related fields. However, there are some salient objections that I would like the Minister to address in his winding-up speech.

First and foremost is the issue of cost. Many Londoners are very concerned about the notion of a blank cheque being signed by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, for the cost of the games. There is little indication that the Government are going to stump up the tab for what is, as has been pointed out, a national rather than just a London Olympic games. It has been estimated by the Greater London Authority that the virtually uncapped liabilities could run to £30 per annum for every Londoner for a decade or two to come. Indeed, there is no real sense that the event will be kept within budget, and history suggests that all Olympic games—except for those that took place in America in 1984 and 1996—have been massively hit by cost overruns.

Notwithstanding the report, which was positive, and the earlier comments of the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey, we have an extremely poor track record in the staging of large-scale sporting events. Let us consider the dome: the main criterion for the case against it has been the appalling lack of a legacy, in spite of all the warm words from this House and beyond during the last few years of the previous century. As for Wembley stadium, I am somewhat less sanguine about the financial implications of what is currently happening regarding the owners of the stadium site. The Minister will remember the Picketts Lock fiasco, and it will be very high on any charge sheet against a London bid when all is said and done over the next four weeks.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Hugh Robertson) will later say a little about the treatment of some of the long-standing traders in the Hackney Wick and the lower Lee Valley estate areas. I have had the opportunity to go to the Marsh Gate lane site; it is clear that there will be massive disruption to many long-standing businesses there, and traders argue that wholly inadequate compensation is being offered at this juncture. The sizeable minority of people against the games feel that their voice has not been sufficiently heard. We will see: if Britain does not win the bid, their concerns will be largely academic. They are a forgotten but none the less very important community.

One of my other concerns as a London Member of Parliament and, until the election, as my party's spokesman on London affairs is that other regeneration projects in the capital have been left on hold to a large extent while the furore surrounding the Olympic bid has taken place. In particular, some important regeneration in the King's Cross area has effectively been put on hold for the past 18 months or so. We touched on the East London line, and soon the Crossrail debate will begin in earnest again. I suspect that it is not entirely coincidental that that Bill has its Second Reading on 20 June—some two and a half weeks before the Olympic bid is decided. There is still no indication whatever of where the money will come for such a project. We wait to hear much more from the Government on the matter.

As for the political implications, I say as a passionate sports fan that there has been a certain amount of grandstanding from the Government. I was not in Athens, but I take on board what the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Derek Wyatt) said about the Prime Minister's enthusiasm. It is a new-found enthusiasm based, I suspect, on the fact that the decision date on the Olympics was going to be in July—in other words, after rather than just before the Olympic games. It gave him the opportunity to rub shoulders with our Olympic stars, although I suspect he thinks Fanny Blankers-Koen is something to do with the Dutch Eurosceptic movement, rather than the 1948 Olympic games.

I feel that there has been a refusal by the Government to turbo-charge the bid by making a firm financial commitment. Had that taken place during the past six months—I certainly suggested it very strongly to some of the Olympic team—it would have made a real difference to our opportunity to get the Olympic games. I wish that the Government had put up the cash and made it absolutely clear that Government funding would provide significant transport infrastructure and other infrastructure projects that east London desperately requires, whether or not we get the Olympic games.

If London were to win the bid, the Government would need to display a hitherto lacking urgency to ensure that the capital city receives its fair share of resources if this bid is not to have all the makings of another national embarrassment.

11.45 am

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): I shall keep my comments brief as I know that other Members wish to speak before we get to the winding-up speeches. I wanted to give a slightly different perspective on the matter as a non-London voice. I am a member of the all-party group on the Olympics under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Derek Wyatt), who has done a tremendous job as part of what the House has done by giving its wholehearted support to the bid, despite the comments of the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field).

It is right that we bring some notes of cynicism to the table, so that we can work through them. However, where I totally disagree with the hon. Gentleman's comments is in relation to my involvement in the build-up to convince the Government to take on the bid. I saw that there was a great deal of reluctance, having been involved with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport during the days of Picketts Lock and Wembley. There was a great deal of resistance, and we knew that in order to succeed the bid had to have the wholehearted support of the Government.

The Government went through a very rigorous process of deciding whether they wanted to support the bid, and since they made that decision they have given it 100 per cent. support. The bid team and people around the world recognise the Prime Minister's commitment and that of the Minister and the Secretary of State. That

has been crucial because in the past we have tended to miss out in bid processes because of a lack of political will and support.

I want to make three points. First, I briefly intervened on the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) about how the benefit will be not just for London but the regions. I also want to talk about the role of volunteers, which is pretty crucial, and about some of the things mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey in relation to how sport adapts.

The current set-up is not sufficient to deliver an Olympic nation in 2012; we need to ensure that the administration is in place and that support for young people in schools comes through. People at school at the moment will be the Olympic champions of 2012. It is heart-warming when we see some of the national squads training, especially in places such as Loughborough and Bath, knowing that we are possibly looking at an Olympic champion; but we do not know which one it is in the pool or on the athletics track. That is the vision, excitement and enthusiasm that the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey talked about. We need to impassion the next generation because, if we win, on July 7, I want everyone who thinks that they have the potential to be an Olympic star in 2012 to have that vision for the rest of the decade; I want to ensure that they are enthused and are given the right support and training all the way through.

On the benefit to the regions, we have some fantastic facilities in Loughborough. We have the National Cricket Academy, indoor athletics facilities and a 50 m swimming pool. Loughborough is one of the English Institute of Sport regional centres of excellence, and quite rightly so. In places such as Bath and Sheffield—it is good to see that all three of the relevant Members are here, before I upset too many of my colleagues—the facilities are among the best in the world.

Those of us who have seen the Australian Institute of Sport will recognise that the facilities in our cities are better because over a period of time the Australian institute has got to the point where its facilities are going slightly downhill. The crucial point—this is where I would like to congratulate the Sports Minister in particular—is that it is not just a question of the facilities, but of the people and coaching. The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey mentioned what we could do through sports co-ordinators and others. That is a crucial point, particularly in relation to coaching: we need the right person in the right place at the right time. We must be fit for purpose right across the board, so that from elite level down to the grass roots we have talent identification and we are pushing the agenda forward.

We have the facilities, and places such as Loughborough and Bath will be major holding camps. The teams that are put into the infrastructure will make a major investment, as was the case in Australia on the Gold coast. They will appear several weeks before the games take place, and if we grasp the opportunity we shall have an enormous cultural event as well as a sporting one. The whole country will be transformed by its enthusiasm for the Olympics, not just London but right across the regions.

That ties in directly with my second point, which concerns the role of volunteers. I am very fortunate in that I chair something called the National Strategic Partnership for Volunteering in Sport—we need to find a shorter title. There are about 30 or 40 organisations that deal with volunteering in sport, such as Sport England, the Central Council of Physical Recreation, the Youth Sports Trust, UK Sport, and Volunteering England—there are hundreds of us. As hon. Members know, 26 per cent. of volunteers are sports volunteers, yet the voluntary sector does not see sports volunteers as part of that sector and sports volunteers do not see themselves as part of the traditional voluntary sector. This will be a golden opportunity. One of the strongest parts of our bids is what we managed to achieve in Manchester, where one of the greatest things was the role of volunteers. Even if we look at the profile of people who went out and volunteered to help in the games in Athens, we can see that British volunteers were among the groups most represented.

Although it has not been mentioned so far, one of the strengths of our bid could be the fact that people from right across the nation will want to come to London to participate and help by volunteering. We need to ensure that we get the infrastructure right for that. That will also enthuse people who, like me, may not quite make it to the 2012 Olympics in the sprint squad—much as I want to maintain my athletic prowess for another 10 years. We can participate in all sorts of ways and people will get enthused by that.

Finally, I want to talk about how we are going to deliver the Olympic stars of the future. We have made great progress. In this job, we can always list all the reasons not to do things and listen to people who do that. I can find 101 reasons not to get out of bed in the morning. However, sometimes that changes once we grasp the initiative, as we have now. The more I think about the possibility of London 2012, the more enthused I get. That feeling wanes a little when I am not really thinking about the bid. However, I am sure that most Members and people watching the debate will have seen the DVD or the video that the bid team have put together. I do not know what it is and I do not know whether it is just me, but every time I see it—I have probably seen it 20 or 30 times—I get a lump in my throat and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. That is just from watching the Olympic stars, getting a sense of the enthusiasm and thinking about things that can be done to generate interest.

We must ensure that we have the sporting infrastructure. We have come a long way in the past five or six years, but we must make the step change that makes these things a possibility because, unfortunately, everybody else around the world is doing exactly the same. By 2008, the Chinese will probably be the medal winners in Beijing. Beijing will be phenomenal. We must gear ourselves up to ensure not just that we are competing against nations across the world, but that we are taking into account the fact that everyone else is stepping up.

It is getting increasingly hard to get into the medal table. We know that holding the games would increase our chances of going up that medal table, and it would be a shame if we did not have the infrastructure in place and the investment from school level through to the club link and elite level. We must ensure that that is available

[Mr. Andy Reed]

for everybody all the way through. I am sure that the Minister is very aware of that. He has been battling hard to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place. However, we would have to sit down very quickly to consider reorganising how we do things. We could use some of the expertise of people who have been involved in the Olympics in the past and drive through change, ripping out as much bureaucracy and administration as possible. I know that everybody who is involved in sport wants to see that so that we can get more coaches on to the field wherever possible.

I am excited by the prospect of the games. I love sport. In fact, I really wish I was in New Zealand watching the British and Irish Lions, rather than here. I am sure that there are many others who feel the same—we shared that last night. I wish the British and Irish Lions good luck. We must emphasise the British passion for sport. The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey mentioned that. I am talking about knowing that there are 40,000 people out there with their British and Irish Lions red shirts on cheering on the team, and about watching what we did in Athens and watching the English team coming back from the World cup in 2003. We have a fantastic passion for sport and not just at elite level. We will turn out in our thousands to watch the London Olympics. It will be the best supported Olympics ever, and I just hope that on 6 July the International Olympic Committee makes the right decision and gives not just London but all of us in the regions a chance to participate.

11.53 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing a timely and important debate. I went to Barcelona in 1992 for the whole of the Olympic games and got hooked. I subsequently went to Atlanta and Sydney for all of the Olympic games except the last day. They were all very different and if the games come to London, I am sure that that will be different too. I did not manage to get to Athens, but I hope to be in Beijing.

I want to concentrate on investment. So much of what is said about investment refers to regeneration and investment in facilities, which is, of course, quite right. However, there is also a longer-lasting investment and legacy: investment in the next generation, rather than necessarily in regeneration. There are four clear parts. We should concentrate on being able to provide sports facilities and encouraging participation in sport by young people, who will be inspired by their own teams and by being able to go and see live sport, rather than just watching it on television. Young people might go to see sports that they have never really taken much notice of in the past. Encouraging young people to participate in sports is the most obvious point, but there are others that one can pick up during the two or three weeks of an Olympic games event.

There is the idea of supporting one's competitive team in a positive way. It is fantastic to see so many young people from so many different parts of the world coming to support their team and being there, even if some of those teams go out in the first heat of the first event—that is not the point. The point is that young people from all over the world meet one another. The fact that young people are able to be at an event such as that represents a huge investment. Spilling out from that is a new and real sense of pride in the country. I certainly noticed it in Barcelona and Sydney, but perhaps not quite so much in Atlanta. There was a new-found pride in young people's sense of being there to support their country and their people. The way in which they then perceived themselves in relation to their country, and their perception of their value to their country and themselves, spread out into an awful lot of other areas. There will be a great deal of investment in young people, who will get a new sense of direction, pride and a feeling of being part of the country through participating.

On disability, the Paralympics, which have been mentioned, are probably one of the more recent greatest successes. When I was in Sydney, I was fascinated to see so many young people who had travelled there from all over Australia. That was partly because every single school in Australia was able to send two pupils. I do not know quite how that was paid for or arranged. During the Paralympics, every single school was required to do a disability project and again people were sent from schools to view the games. That was an inspired way of connecting young people to the area of disability. They could perceive people with disabilities very differently. It was very positive and inventive. The idea was not taken up particularly in Athens, but we may like to consider it if we win the bid. So, we are talking about investment not just in infrastructure, however important that is, but in our young people in so many different ways. That is a legacy that goes on and on. We see young Spanish athletes and sports people coming to the fore in lots of different sports, not least in the recent tennis tournament in France.

As a Cornwall representative, I should say that we hope that Cornwall will be part of this event. We think that there are great opportunities for providing training camps for the smaller teams. We recognise that we are not going to have the big teams, but there are a significant number of smaller teams that will want to have a training camp in a beautiful part of the country. There are facilities for sailing, but also for other sports. We can provide that sort of facility not a million miles away from London and other areas. Although Cornwall is on the periphery and although it may feel to a certain extent that it is not going to be part of the heart of the games, it will play its part. People down there will be able to see that Cornwall, like every other part of the country, supports the games and wants to be part of them. I hope that on 6 July we will get the win that we deserve.

11.59 am

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I shall begin, as everyone else has, by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) not only on securing the debate but on its timing, which comes hot on the heels of an excellent IOC evaluation report.

My hon. Friend began by rightly praising a large number of people who have been responsible for getting our bid to its current position. In particular he mentioned the sterling efforts of Lord Coe, who, following on from the work of Barbara Cassani, has done a tremendous job, aided by Keith Mills and all the

team. My hon. Friend rightly added his compliments to a wide range of other people, not least the major sponsors of the Olympic bid, whose contributions have been tremendous. He rightly, too, noted the crucial role that cross-party support has played in the bid. That support is referred to in the evaluation report.

Like the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Derek Wyatt), my hon. Friend paid particular tribute to the leadership of the Prime Minister. My hon. Friend was right to do so, notwithstanding some of the slightly cynical remarks made by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) about the Prime Minister's motivations. The Prime Minister has done a vital job, and I think that his visit to Athens will pay huge dividends in four weeks' time.

The Liberal Democrats fully and enthusiastically support our bid for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. We genuinely believe that if the bid is successful, it will leave an indelible legacy not only to London but to all parts of the country, to communities and to the entire sporting nation. To pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend, we recognise that if the games were to come to London they would be coming to one of the most vibrant, diverse and cosmopolitan cities in the world, with 200 different communities speaking 300 different languages. With our long track record of cultural activity, we would enrich the Olympic movement through the cultural component of the games, as well as through the sporting activities already referred to. Our bid is undoubtedly gaining momentum as we get closer to the final decision in four weeks' time, and it increasingly looks like a two-horse race between ourselves and Paris.

Parliamentary colleagues have made important and valuable contributions to the debate. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, who speaks with such distinction on these matters, reminded us of some of the sporting history of this country, and particularly of the important contribution that this country has made to sport, with the introduction of games such as cricket, rugby, tennis and even skiing. He reminded us also that in 1948 this country rescued the Olympic games. The Minister added to that point when he noted that the 1948 games were the first to be televised—another first for the BBC.

Had the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey had more time, I am sure that he would have pointed out that this country can also claim to have given to the Olympic movement the Paralympic games. We made a major contribution to the establishment of that important part of the movement. In his characteristic way, he suggested several ways of moving forward. For instance, his idea of the fellowship of Olympic cities bears consideration. I support his idea of getting all past Olympic host cities to hold an opening night and of elevating the Minister for Sport and Tourism to Olympics Minister, and I hope that projects such as the sports film archive will be taken up.

There was one other historical point that neither the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey nor anyone else mentioned. I hope that I am correct to say, as the Queen will be offended if I am wrong, that it is her diamond jubilee in 2012. That would add a little extra to our bid.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster made an almost ritual speech. He felt that someone must point out one or two concerns, and in representing some of his constituents he made reference to those matters. However, I was delighted to hear him begin and end his speech by recognising his passion for sport and his belief that if the games were to come to London, they would be a fantastic opportunity for the capital and for the rest of the country. I have no doubt that the Minister will pick up on some of the points that he made, but I can assure him that the dome and the Olympic bid have nothing whatever in common: one was a disaster, the other will be a huge triumph.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster raised his concern about the financing package, yet the IOC evaluation document makes it clear that the package is robust. The vast majority of people who have analysed it feel very confident. Notwithstanding past problems, we have a robust package.

I was delighted that my sedentary interventions on the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) persuaded him to add Bath whenever he mentioned Loughborough thereafter. I am grateful to him for recognising that both our wonderful constituencies will benefit enormously from the Olympics coming to London, and for highlighting the fact that the games will benefit not only the capital but all sorts of places throughout the country. My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) noted that Cornwall, too, was expected to benefit from the games.

The hon. Member for Loughborough also added to our debate a point about the important role of volunteers in the games. Yesterday I spoke to the chief executive of the Scout movement, and I understand that he has already discussed with the Minister the role that it, among many other organisations, can play in making the games the most successful ever. The hon. Member for Loughborough rightly noted that the games need to be used as a starting gun for improving sport in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall talked about the importance of investment not only in infrastructure but in areas such as the support of teams and disability awareness.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for giving way, particularly as I was not present at the start of the debate. I apologise to the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) for that. Will the hon. Member for Bath add his weight to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) about the lack of compensation for businesses in the east end? I have a constituency case in which a guy owns the site where the main track would be. The London Development Agency is paying lip service to compensation. It has not come up with a decent package, and it has no alternative land.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I apologise to his hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster for not referring to that issue. I noted that during his contribution

[Mr. Foster]

my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey was nodding sympathetically. I know that he has a degree of sympathy with that issue, and no doubt the Minister will wish to pick up on it.

This country's passion for sport has not been mentioned enough. I chide my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey for saying that 60,000 people watched the London marathon. He is wrong, as the number was more than 500,000. There are 40,000 people watching the British and Irish Lions in New Zealand, and 90 per cent. of the tickets for the Commonwealth games in Manchester were sold. We had the largest number of fans at the Olympics in Athens, with 20,000 Britons over there watching. With the ticket pricing policy in place for our bid, we will ensure that our stadiums are full.

We have a huge commitment to our sportsmen and sportswomen, and I pay tribute to the British Olympic Association, in its centenary year, for the enormous amount of work it has done to develop and support Team GB. Support throughout the country has grown since the figures shown in the bid evaluation were collated. Support is reaching 80 per cent. in all parts of the country, including Scotland, although the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is no longer present.

In addition to all those people who have already been thanked, I thank the media in this country. It is phenomenal that our London newspaper, the *Evening Standard*, has backed the bid throughout. I am delighted that in all parts of the country, our local papers have supported the bid. For example, my local paper, the *Bath Chronicle*, regularly supports the opportunities that the Olympic bid would bring to Bath. There are many people to be thanked. We have an impressive bid. I hope that, on 6 July, we will hear that we have been successful.

12.10 pm

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent) (Con): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing the debate and on the style in which he did so. The subject is, clearly, important to all London MPs. As many people have said, it is also important to all those interested in sport in the United Kingdom.

There were excellent speeches from the Floor, including those from my next-door neighbour, the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Derek Wyatt), who has done much good work with the all-party group on the Olympics, my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), who put on record a number of concerns—there is no point in trying to duck those concerns; they are real ones and we ought to meet them head on—the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed), who made some excellent points about volunteers, the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), who talked about legacy issues, and the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster). Finally, as it is the first time in which I have seen him in this parliamentary Session, I welcome the Minister back to his post. I congratulate him on raising more than £20,000 during the London marathon for the Ron Pickering memorial fund. I wish him well in his endeavours in the next month in everything he is doing to bring the games to London.

Cross-party political support is a vital prerequisite of success when the IOC votes in Singapore, so I put on record again my strong personal support, and that of my party, for the London 2012 bid. I also publicly pay tribute to Lord Coe and the work that he has done, along with his team, to bring the games to London. As the evaluation report yesterday clearly showed, London has come a long way in a short space of time. It is thanks primarily to the work that Lord Coe's team has done that we are in such a strong position in this the last month.

Why do we all back the bid? Three reasons stand out above all else. The first is regeneration. East London desperately needs regeneration, in particular areas such as the lower Lee valley. That point was alluded to by many of those who spoke. The Arup report suggested that that regeneration would involve more than 3,000 full-time jobs in the east London economy, 4,000 new housing units, all of them on brownfield land, and a massive large-scale reclamation of derelict and underused land. That must be a good reason.

Secondly, there would be economic and, as the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey said, environmental benefits. There will be a massive surge in tourism and related services. Businesses will benefit. Many parts of the local economy, throughout the country, will benefit from the games. In Barcelona, the benefit was as much as £11 billion. Clearly, that is a worthwhile prize.

Thirdly, for those of us who care about sport in the United Kingdom, there is the benefit that the bid will bring to sport generically. Hosting the Olympic games is, as many people said, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enthuse an entire generation, and one that we should not miss.

Having said that, it is the role of Oppositions to ask questions. I put four questions to the Minister. In raising the questions, at what I know is a particularly sensitive time, I hope that I am giving him the opportunity to answer them and, therefore, to strengthen the bid and provide reassurances. The first question is about compensation for businesses in the lower Lee valley. The evaluation report touched on that question. It raised the issue of disputes with local businesses about land acquisition. Will the Minister confirm that steps are being taken to ensure that the concerns of local business men are taken on board?

The second question is about cost overruns. I have no direct experience of the issue myself, but I am told that it was raised regularly on the doorstep in London during the general election campaign. Indeed, I would be surprised if that were not the case. The last two games, in Sydney and Athens, overran considerably. I know that the Minister has always said that a particular method of calculation was used for those games, but can he provide some reassurance that the budgetary limits set out in the candidate file will be met?

Thirdly, there is the question of deliverability. I am confident about it, but, in view of the fact that Wembley is one of the venues that would be used for football in the games, has the Minister received any concrete

assurances—that is not an unfortunate pun—from Multiplex that the stadium will be delivered on time and to budget.

Finally, there is the question of the tax take on the Olympic lottery game. This has been given particular urgency this week by the news that the Treasury is going to forgo the tax take on the Bob Geldof concerts. Is the Minister making any progress with the Chancellor of the Exchequer in securing the tax take for the Olympic lottery game? Will he confirm that the estimate of the lottery distributors—£320 million—is fair?

I will be brief, because I want to give the Minister the maximum time to finish. So, I will just run through those points again and finish where I started. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey on securing the debate and congratulate hon. Members who made this morning's other contributions. Secondly, I pay tribute to Lord Coe and his team for the remarkable work that they have done to bring the games to London. Thirdly, in welcoming the Minister back to his post, which I do genuinely, I ask him to address the four points that I put to him. I finish by reiterating my strong support, and that of my party, for the London 2012 bid. There is no doubt that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for all of us who care about sport in this country and, indeed, all of us who care about this country's standing in the world. Anybody who cares about those two things can only wish the bid well.

12.16 pm

The Minister for Sport and Tourism (Mr. Richard Caborn): I thank the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) for initiating the debate. It is timely this morning, as it comes on the back of yesterday's IOC report. I also thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Hugh Robertson) for his kind words and I welcome him back to his job. I hope that we and the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who has been extremely supportive, are successful as we run up to 6 July and the outcome of the bid.

It is an exciting time, particularly after the report from the IOC yesterday, which clearly put us in equal position with the leaders, Paris and, indeed, Madrid. I also thank the press. We politicians do not often thank the press, but I genuinely thank it for what it has done. We can see its support in today's headlines. We must make it clear that the British press is read disproportionately around the world. That is why it is so important that we have been able to convince it and that we have had a good dialogue with it. I thank it for its work.

I also put on record my thanks to the political parties, which is something that I will come to later. Even in the run-up to the general election, the unanimity of purpose on the issue held well. For those who do not know, during the period of purdah, the one thing on which we had continued action and support was the Olympic bid. That shows the support that the bid has got.

We are now in the last four weeks and what is clearly going to be an active part of the bid, as we head to Singapore on 6 July. While we bid for the Olympics, it is important that the Paralympics are not missed out. A number of hon. Members referred to the Paralympics. In 1948, what were effectively the first Paralympics took place at Stoke Mandeville. So if, as we all hope, we get the Olympics and the Paralympics in 2012, it will be the coming home of the Paralympics to the nation that started them in 1948.

What was pleasing in the report yesterday was that it showed that the work that has been done by many parties in the last 12 or 18 months has created a platform and springboard from which we can clearly win the bid. The decision is too close to call; there is no doubt about that. We will be going up to the wire on 6 July. When the decision was made in favour of Sydney, it was won by one vote of the 120-odd members who voted. That was how close it was run. So, it is a close race.

However, a difference came out in the report. Some would say that it was a criticism. I would say that it was a strength. The report said that one or two of our boxes were not ticked to the degree that Paris' boxes were. That is true, but our bid is probably the most exciting bid. It is the one that will take the Olympic movement well into the 21st century. It has married old and new. Yes, the construction is still going on, and we shall construct state-of-the-art facilities and transport. That is why those doubts were there. As I said clearly to the press, anyone who wants to vote for a modern Olympics with state-of-the-art facilities should vote for London; anyone who wants to vote for the status quo should vote for somewhere else. That is the strength of our bid, and where the differences are.

I pay tribute to the leadership of Lord Coe. We should also give credit to Barbara Cassani, because she set up the company, with some good, robust personnel. Seb took over when we got on to the shortlist. He is very good at coming down the last 100m, as he has done so on a number of occasions, on two of which he won gold. I told him the other day that the third time he wins will be when he comes down the straight on 6 July.

Yesterday, the evaluation report of the IOC gave a huge vote of confidence to our bid. I say to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) that the finance was, together with transport, probably examined more than the other chapters in our candidate file. That was, to some extent, due to the dome and to Picketts Lock. However, we have learned from our mistakes there. That is why the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I went round the world talking to people who had run the Olympics, asking them the simple question, "What would you do differently if you got the games again?" A number of issues arose from that, including finance. They said, "If you are going to run a bid, make sure that your budget is realistic, deliverable and has contingencies." That is why it is pleasing that, on finance, the report says:

> "The UK government has guaranteed that it would act as the ultimate financial guarantor to cover any shortfall from the Games. The budgeting process is very detailed and meticulous, and assumptions are well supported and documented. The budget appears to be reasonable and achievable."

That is what the report says, and it shows clearly that we have laid the ghosts of the dome and Picketts Lock to rest, in terms of public financing and public support. That is very important.

The report also recognises that London can hold a first-class Games, and the Olympics would live in our memories. That is an important part of the modern

[Mr. Richard Caborn]

Olympics. The rings were a little tarnished at Salt Lake City, but they will shine again. What could be better than to have an Olympic park in one of the most famous capital cities in the world, which will be there for generations to come? If anyone wants to see a reflection of that, they should go to Munich. Munich will, unfortunately, be remembered for what happened there, but the legacy of the Olympic movement stands there in the Olympic park. It has stood there for many years, and millions of people who use the park week in, week out, have been reminded by it of what the Olympic movement is all about. That is what we would have—an Olympic park in this great capital of the world.

We would also marry the modern with the world. Tennis will take place at Wimbledon, football at Wembley, and archery at Lord's. Athletes will perform in venues with a truly iconic background. People ask me about Wembley, which will be complete only a month behind schedule and within budget—although the line of last resort on Wembley is the Football Association, and not the Government. In another city just across the English channel, they were talking about where some of the events would be held but, to be honest, beach volleyball on Horseguards parade takes some beating. Imagine the Prime Minister watching from No. 10 Downing street and the Queen watching from Buckingham palace over St. James's park. We can match the Eiffel tower any day.

A previous speaker paid a kind tribute to my having finished the London marathon a few weeks ago. It is a fantastic marathon. People say that there were slightly over half a million people; in fact, I am told that there were over three-quarters of a million people on the streets. When I was asked what it was like to take part, I said that it was like running a 26-mile carnival. I set off and finished just outside Buckingham palace. I thought about the extra few hundred yards that one has to run, because at some stage in our history, the Queen decided that she wanted to add a few yards to it. I can honestly say that the citizens of London came out in their masses on a fantastic day. People gave us oranges; people gave us jelly babies. Three-quarters of a million people were cheering us on from start to finish. We are truly good at staging that type of event. No other marathon in the world can reproduce the atmosphere of the London marathon. It is absolutely superb. I was running with an American, who remarked on the fact that we were passing the London Eye and St. Paul's cathedral. People were running 30 deep over Tower bridge—that is half way round, the 13-mile mark—and they go past many other places and finish in front of Buckingham palace. It is truly a marathon that passes some of the greatest landmarks in the world. Some other events will be held elsewhere: the triathlon at Greenwich park, with the first part—the swim—in the Serpentine.

We have also addressed the issue of the legacy of the Games. We have learned from our experiences. The Commonwealth Games in Manchester were a great success. The buildings there provide a legacy—unlike other places in the world that have run major sporting events and have been left with one or two white elephants. I know that there was great criticism about the stadium after the closure of the Commonwealth Games. I had to defend it on Radio 5 Live. We ripped up the track and dug a couple of metres down to produce a stadium that now houses Manchester City football team. Its contribution to the regeneration of the east part of Manchester has been significant. The new Olympic stadium will hold 80,000 people, but has been designed to be downsized to a 25,000-seater stadium. Three swimming pools that will be used for the Games will be moved to other parts of the country, and two of the sports arenas will be dismantled and repositioned elsewhere in the country.

Richard Ottaway: Before the Minister concludes, will he say something about compensation for the displaced businesses?

Mr. Caborn: I am coming to the hon. Gentleman's point now. He asks important and reasonable questions, which I do not want to be accused of ducking. There have been problems with the Lee valley park, although it is the LDA that is conducting the negotiations. I cannot get involved in those negotiations, other than to say that I believe that the compensation that has been offered is fair. The negotiations are continuing, and I hope that no business will lose out. I hope that they will be concluded satisfactorily. I must also put it on record that 78 per cent. of businesses in London's east end support the bid. Last week, 52 businesses from Marshgate lane announced their full backing of the bid, too. I genuinely hope that that matter can be amicably resolved.

I have explained the issues of cost overruns and deliverability. On tax take, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that all the financial modelling that we have done has included tax. I know that the Opposition have a different figure to ours, and I am happy for them to continue to talk to the Treasury. If they are successful, we shall have more money going into the Olympics' coffers. However, we have done our modelling on the basis that tax will be levied in the normal way, as it is on all lottery money.

I was in Kiev and Budapest recently, and I shall be in Poland later this week. When the national Olympic committees meet, I am always struck by the fact that we have put the athletes right at the heart of our bid. It is the first time in a long time that the athletes' village will be at the centre of the Olympic park. That has commended itself to athletes. It is important that we do that, because the athletes, who will have trained for four years and will go out to win medals, should be at the centre of the Olympics. With the answers to all the other questions that have been very satisfactory, including on transport, I cannot go into them today—I think that we already have. Let us hope that at about this time, lunchtime or 1 o'clock-ish, on 6 July—the result should be available here at about the same time as we get it—when Jacques Rogge opens the envelope, we will celebrate a fantastic victory. If we do, sport will be back on the agenda, not just for the Government, but for the nation. What could we want better than that?

Mr. Eric Illsley(in the Chair): Before the next debate, I remind hon. Members that anyone who wants to speak in the debate requires the permission of the initiator, the Minister and myself.

Airguns

12.30 pm

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this opportunity to highlight what I believe is growing public concern about the use, ownership and possession of airguns. I am raising the matter because of the concerns of local residents and community organisations in my constituency, and in particular, the Lorne community council, which represents about 8,000 residents in the Leith part of the constituency. That organisation is a very effective and representative voice of a local community.

We have three main concerns about airguns. First, people are concerned about the ability of young people in their area and elsewhere to get hold of not only air weapons but other devices, such as replica guns, including, of course, BB guns, which are a menace in many respects. Secondly, they have been shocked by several highly publicised incidents involving airguns that have taken place in Scotland, including some in Edinburgh. Among those was the tragic death of two-year-old Andrew Morton, in Glasgow, which many hon. Members will know about.

Thirdly, the Lorne community council specifically raised with me the fact that firefighters in the Lothian area had become targets of violence, including from airguns, when attending emergencies. Brian Allaway, the firemaster of Lothian and Borders fire and rescue service, whom I contacted before the debate to confirm the view of his service on the issue, told me:

"If this type of attack continues, which is almost inevitable unless something is done about controlling airguns, it could easily result in firefighters being seriously injured or even killed".

He added:

"I would be strongly supportive of any assistance to control and prevent these worrying occurrences".

I should make it clear that my constituency does not have a particularly severe problem with airguns or gun crime in general compared with other areas of the country. Far from it: we are fortunate enough to have relatively low crime rates in general, including rates of gun crime, in comparison with those in many other urban centres in the UK. It is therefore significant that in a constituency such as mine there is a clear demand for action on control of airguns and replica guns. That underlines a country-wide concern to which the Government need to respond.

We can get a good idea of the problem by skimming almost at random through some of the newspaper headlines about incidents around the country. A couple of weeks ago, *The Scotsman* reported:

"A 12-year-old boy has died after he was shot in the eye with an air rifle by a 14-year-old friend as they played in a bedroom".

That incident was in England. Another story, about Edinburgh, is headlined: "Police warn parents fake guns may end in child death",

and it begins:

"Police have warned it could only be a matter of time before a youngster brandishing a fake gun in the Capital is shot by armed officers."

A report on a recent case from Clackmannan states:

"A teenager has been charged after a 14-year-old boy was hit in the face with an airgun pellet."

In addition:

"A mother was hit on the back of the head in an apparent airgun attack while out jogging near her Lothians home."

In another Edinburgh case:

"A 14-year-old boy has been charged in connection with an incident in which a six-year-old was shot"

with an airgun. I have, of course, already referred to the tragic case of Andrew Morton, from Glasgow, which aroused so much public concern.

Those concerns are shared by the emergency services. I quoted the firemaster of Lothian and Borders fire and rescue service. The deputy chief constable of Lothian and Borders police, Malcolm Dickson, recently told the Edinburgh *Evening News*:

"Fortunately, serious injuries with airguns are not that common, but when they do occur they cause great public concern and particular anguish to people involved . . . I still don't know why air weapons exist. I just cannot see what their purpose is. The number of air weapons used for pest control is very small and when they are used for this purpose, it is usually outside the city.

I find it completely inappropriate for people to have these weapons in urban environments. It is also irresponsible for parents to allow children to run around with these weapons."

I share Mr. Dickson's sentiments entirely.

I raise this issue today in the knowledge that the Government are at the stage in the legislative timetable when they are considering what further measures should be taken to deal with the problem of airguns and replica weapons. There was an indication in the Queen's Speech that some form of legislation would be presented in due course. That legislation will, of course, apply on a UK basis, as these are reserved matters for which the UK Parliament has responsibility. There is concern in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, that the right type of legislation and controls should be put into effect.

The media seem to be saying—perhaps my reading is incorrect—that the Government are still in the process of considering exactly what direction they will take and how far they will go in responding to public concern. I shall be blunt: my purpose in raising the issue today is to urge them to take tough measures to crack down on the misuse of airguns and replica guns, and to send them a clear message that the members of the public who speak to me want tough controls on airguns. I believe that I speak also for the vast majority of the public.

I accept that there is room for debate about exactly what form such tightening of the laws on airguns should take. Some would argue for a total ban, and others will want a form of licensing system. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Jeff Ennis), who is present, has tabled an early-day motion along those lines. I accept that we need laws that work and can be enforced. The deputy chief constable of Lothian and Borders police, whom I quoted earlier, also accepted that the matter could not be dealt with overnight, as there are clearly many millions of airguns in the country and it will take some time to change the law effectively. However, the issue certainly deserves both debate and action at an early stage in the current legislative timetable.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): I endorse my hon. Friend's comments, especially about replica weapons, which are an increasing menace. Does he accept that, as the law stands, no one under the age of

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17 can legally purchase an airgun or pellets? There are about 30 separate offences under which the misuse of airguns to lead to a criminal prosecution. In addition to clarifying the law, should we not also ensure that the existing law is properly enforced by the police?

Mark Lazarowicz: My hon. Friend is right. There is a lot to be done to ensure that the existing law is effectively enforced. The excellent campaign, "If you don't need it, get shot of it", is being run by the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland and the Scottish Executive. It is designed to encourage members of the public to hand in unwanted airguns. The law needs to be enforced, but the signs are that we need changes in the law as well and that the existing law does not go far enough.

Personally, I would be in favour of moving to a system in which all airguns were removed from use; the only exceptions would be those used for genuine sporting purposes or for acceptable reasons such as pest control—and then only under licence. I suggest that the age limit for possession and use should be raised to 18 and that there should be a ban on replica guns. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) agrees with me about that. I have set out those three points in early-day motion 234. I am pleased to see that, within a couple of days, it has received the support of several hon. Members. I hope that those who have not yet signed it will do so, and that they will also sign other EDMs such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough, to show their concern about the issue and their wish for action.

With the support of Lorne community council—the local community organisation in my constituency to which I referred earlier—I have also launched a public petition and a campaign calling for the three changes to the law that I set out in my early-day motion. It is an indication of public concern about the issue that even before I formally launched the petition, constituents came into my office asking for copies so that they could circulate it among friends and family and in their communities to collect signatures. I would be happy to assist any hon. Members who would like copies of the petition for use in their own constituencies.

I hope that there is a good response to my petition and to the others in many parts of the UK that have often been spontaneously launched following incidents in, I am afraid, all too many of our cities, towns and villages. I believe that the strong support shown in such petitions will have a major influence on the Government when they decide on the details of the legislation that they intend to introduce in due course.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on calling this important and timely debate. He mentioned my early-day motion 221, which raises the possibility of introducing a licensing system, given that there are already more than 4 million unlicensed air weapons in this country. However, is he aware that I called an Adjournment debate on this very issue as long ago as 1999? Given that that is more than five years ago, it is time that the Government did something about the issue. The current legal controls are not working, and we need to tighten them up to ensure the safety of children in particular.

Mark Lazarowicz: My hon. Friend is recognised throughout the House for the work that he has been doing on this issue and for the campaign that he has been running. I agree that it is time for action to be taken. We can have a debate about whether there should be a ban or a licence scheme, but we certainly agree that action is needed, and we expect the Government to introduce appropriate legislation.

I congratulate the Government on the measures that they have taken so far to tighten up the law on airguns, and I certainly recognise that they have made a difference. As I said, there have been campaigns in Scotland and in England and Wales to deal with the problem, to encourage the public to hand in unwanted airguns and to draw attention to the laws that have been tightened up. However, we must do more. We must move further. That is why I hope that today's debate will encourage the Government to respond to the scale of the problem and to growing public concern by taking firm measures to clamp down on the misuse of airguns and the dangers presented by replica guns. It is time to take these weapons off our streets and out of our communities, where there is absolutely no need for them to be.

12.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Paul Goggins): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) on securing this important debate, which raises many challenging and significant issues. I also pay tribute to those of my hon. Friends who are here, because they have consistently raised their concerns about this issue over many years.

Of course, I recognise the depth and range of feelings aroused by this matter among community council members in my hon. Friend's constituency and among other groups both there and throughout the country. Such groups are very vocal about their concerns, which are forcefully brought home to us by incidents such as the tragic death of the two-year-old Andrew Morton. I am sure that that incident arouses in us all a feeling of deep sympathy for that young boy's family and a determination to do all that we can to avoid the reoccurrence of such incidents. Indeed, public safety must always be uppermost in our minds. The shootings about which we have heard during the debate, including the cynical targeting of fire fighters, demonstrate just how dangerous air weapons can be in the wrong place and in the wrong hands.

There are four distinct classes of airgun. At the lower end of the scale, there are airsoft weapons, which are frequently described as BB guns. Although there is considerable concern about the use of such weapons, they are not capable of inflicting potentially lethal injury, so they are not classed as firearms and do not fall under the control of the Firearms Act 1968. Airguns that are classed as firearms do not require a police-issued firearms certificate unless they are of a type considered by the Secretary of State to be especially dangerous. These more dangerous weapons include air pistols with

muzzle energies in excess of 6 ft pounds and air rifles with muzzle energies in excess of 12 ft pounds. Anybody wishing to possess either type of weapon must demonstrate that they have a good reason to do so.

Finally, there are air weapons that have been designed or adapted to use a self-contained gas cartridge or SCGC system. The cartridges are loaded into the weapon in the same way that conventional cartridges are loaded into conventional firearms and are fired in the same way. One problem with such air weapons is that their design and construction make them amenable for conversion to conventional ammunition. To prevent their conversion and use by criminals, such weapons were, by virtue of section 39 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, brought under the control of section 5 of the 1968 Act. Weapons controlled by section 5 are prohibited weapons that may be possessed only with the specific authority of the Secretary of State, although existing owners were allowed to keep them, provided that they obtained a firearms certificate.

Although, as I said, there is no requirement for low-powered air weapons to be kept on a certificate, the law nevertheless recognises that the misuse of air weapons can result in very serious injuries and, on occasion, even death. The use and possession of airguns is therefore strictly controlled. It is, for example, an offence for anyone to sell or to make a gift of an air weapon to a person under 17. It is an offence for anyone under 14 to be in possession of an air weapon unless they are under the direct supervision of a person aged 21 or over. It is an offence for anyone under 17 to be in unsupervised possession of an air weapon unless they are at an approved club or miniature shooting gallery, or on private land with the owner's permission. It is an offence for anyone between 14 and 16 who is shooting unsupervised on private land to allow any pellet to cross the boundary of that land. It is also an offence for anyone of any age to be in possession of an air weapon in a public place without a reasonable excuse or to discharge an air weapon within 50 ft of the centre of a public road in such a way as to impede or endanger road users.

Trespassing with an air weapon, be it in a building or on land, is an offence, as is shooting protected wild birds or causing any animal unnecessary suffering. Furthermore, having an air weapon with intent to commit a crime is a very serious offence, as is having an air weapon with intent to endanger life or damage property. There is, of course, also a range of other offences—under legislation covering offences against the person, for example. There is also a range of penalties that the court might apply, extending to life imprisonment for the more serious offences of going armed or endangering another person's life. So there is a range of serious offences and a commensurate range of penalties that the courts can apply when people commit those offences.

Of course, air weapons have legitimate uses. They are often used by clubs or individual shooters because they are very short-ranged and can be used where the length of ranges is restricted. They are also much less powerful than conventional target weapons, so they can be used to teach new shooters the safe handling of guns and shooting techniques. Besides their use as target weapons, air weapons are used in vermin control, as their low power makes them ideal for use in confined situations or inside buildings, where there would be a danger of damage to the fabric if conventional weapons were used. There are legitimate, constructive uses to which air weapons can be put.

Although there are no completely reliable figures, it is estimated that there are between 4 million and 7 million air weapons in private ownership in Great Britain. In 2003-04, which is the latest period for which we have figures, air weapons were used in 13,756 recorded offences in England and Wales, with a further 415 in Scotland. The majority of those offences—some 10,395, plus 255 in Scotland—were acts of minor criminal damage. Of the remainder, 2,377 involved injuries, of which 156 were more serious than a bruise and one was, regrettably, fatal. Scotland recorded a further 112 injuries of all kinds.

Any incident of misuse is, of course, wholly unacceptable, and we are determined to tackle the problem vigorously. My hon. Friend has given us a comprehensive overview of the deep concerns that have been expressed in his constituency. I pay tribute to the work that he has done in his constituency and the petition that he initiated, allowing people there to be vocal about their concerns. The events in his constituency that he outlined will have undoubtedly prompted people to voice those concerns.

I understand those concerns and want to reassure my hon. Friend that we have been working closely at ministerial and official level with colleagues in Scotland to see what more can be done. I hope that he will be reassured to know that yesterday my ministerial colleagues and I met the Scottish Minister for Justice, Cathy Jamieson, to discuss this very issue. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has undertaken to meet the First Minister and the Minister for Justice to discuss further proposals shortly. In looking at options, we must consider proportionality, cost and ease of policing, as well as effectiveness. We must also take into account the legitimate expectations of the vast majority of air weapon owners, who use their guns safely and responsibly and condemn those who misuse air weapons.

Various proposals have been made. An outright ban is not practical, bearing in mind the numbers. As I said, between 4 million and 7 million air weapons are in private ownership, with no record of who possesses them or where they are. Many owners would fail to surrender their guns, deliberately or otherwise. The cost of compensation would run into many millions of pounds and the logistical problems of paying it and disposing of the unwanted guns would be considerable. In addition, the guns not handed in could form the basis of a black market in such weapons.

The introduction of a certification regime would, in theory at least, help to locate the owners of all the air weapons in circulation and give the police the opportunity to vet all potential owners before allowing them to purchase an air weapon. Again, however, not all owners may be prepared either to surrender their guns or to apply for a certificate. Certification would be a huge and potentially resource-intensive task that could place a considerable administrative burden on the police service and be met only at the expense of other areas of police work.

Martin Salter: I am interested to hear the Minister's considered response. Does he accept that a licensing

[Martin Salter]

system is not necessarily the panacea that some make it out to be? I cite the example of Thomas Hamilton, the man responsible for the horrific Dunblane outrage, who was in possession of legitimate firearms licences, as was Michael Ryan, the man responsible for the horrific murders in Hungerford. We must be careful to ensure that a licensing system, if proposed, does not seek to do more than it is capable of doing.

Paul Goggins: I hope that I have given an assurance that one must be both practical and well intentioned on such issues. I am sure that those who make such proposals do so for positive reasons, but we would need to ensure that such systems worked if we were ever to consider introducing them.

Restricting sales to authorised dealers would perhaps be another way of limiting availability and would at least reduce the number of outlets for such weapons. Registered dealers tend to be careful in their dealings. However, again there is no guarantee that that would stop air weapons from getting into the hands of the wrong sort of people. Indeed, there is some anecdotal evidence that many of the guns being misused are acquired second hand, and controls on such sales would be unenforceable. Also, record keeping would be problematic, because most airguns do not have a unique serial number, although that is something that we are keeping under active review.

There have been many calls to change the age limits at which air weapons can be owned or used unsupervised. Much of the misuse of airguns is down to young people, and in the 2003 Act we raised the age limit for ownership from 14 to 17. Given that we propose to increase the age limit for buying knives to 18, there is a strong argument for introducing a similar age limit for air weapons.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith will be aware, we promised in our manifesto to introduce a violent crime reduction Bill and to tighten the law on the indiscriminate and reckless firing of air weapons from private property.

Mark Lazarowicz: If legislation regarding the age at which airguns can be possessed comes forward, it will be welcome, but I hope that my hon. Friend will introduce other measures to respond to the concerns that hon. Members have raised in this debate.

Paul Goggins: In the short time that remains, I hope to touch on one or two of those issues, although age limits are an important issue to which people regularly draw Ministers' attention. The prohibition on allowing pellets to cross the boundary of property applies only to young people under 17. We will look to extend that offence to people of any age. We are also looking to toughen up the penalties for those convicted of having an air weapon in a public space without a reasonable excuse. We want to send out a clear and powerful message that such behaviour will not be tolerated.

In the wrong hands, air weapons can be extremely dangerous and a source of considerable nuisance. We view such misuse very seriously indeed and have already taken measures that bear down hard on irresponsible and criminal behaviour. However, there is no room for complacency. The misuse of air weapons is a persistent problem, particularly in urban areas, and it is an issue that we cannot ignore. We will shortly bring forward further measures to increase age limits and stop people from firing beyond the boundaries of premises, thereby addressing concerns about private land being used as a shield from prosecution. We are also considering increasing the penalty available to the courts for anyone convicted of having an air weapon in a public place without a reasonable excuse. Such measures will, I hope, help to reassure my hon. Friends that we are determined to reduce air weapon misuse.

Home Office Ministers are in discussion with our Scottish colleagues, who are considering measures to restrict further the availability of air weapons. I can assure my hon. Friend that we shall continue to keep the law under close scrutiny, in partnership with Scottish colleagues, to make sure that we do all that we can to ensure the public's safety.

12.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

NHS Dentistry

1 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I warmly welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Illsley, and I also welcome the new Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne), who will answer the debate. While doing so, however, may I express my concern that the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), whose brief is dentistry—as it was in the last Parliament—is not here to respond to this debate on an issue of great concern not only to my constituents but to the population at large? Her absence, coupled with the fact that she did not attend the conference of the British Dental Association, shows a lack of interest in this important subject. I hope that the Minister will do his best as her substitute—perhaps in due course he will be promoted to the important post of dentistry Minister if he demonstrates his interest in the subject.

I hope that the Minister shares my belief that healthy teeth and gums are very important for a good quality of life. Dental care should, therefore, be a core responsibility of the national health service, so that our citizens can enjoy healthy teeth for life through preventive treatment. Without healthy teeth and gums, people suffer pain, discomfort, bad breath and low self-esteem. Ultimately, they can be rendered unable to masticate and digest, and that affects other aspects of their health.

If the Minister is with me so far, I hope that he can answer this question, which I put to him on behalf of my constituents and millions of others who contribute through high taxes and national insurance to the NHS and believe in its avowed principles: is the phrase NHS dentistry now an oxymoron? How can NHS dentistry be safe in this Government's hands when all the evidence suggests that it is being relegated to the status of a fringe NHS service, as eye care and chiropody have been?

Let us consider access to NHS dentistry. In 1999, at a dental conference in Bournemouth, the Prime Minister pledged that by September 2001, NHS dentistry would be available to all who wanted it. Not only has that pledge been broken, but things have got far worse. The traditional and surest guarantee of access to an NHS dentist is to be a registered patient of an NHS dentist.

> "All treatment necessary to maintain oral health is available on the NHS and dentists cannot refuse any necessary treatment to a registered patient."

That statement is contained in the Government policy document, "NHS Dentistry: Delivering Change", published in July 2004. Superficially, it sounds fine, but the catch lies in the use of the phrase "registered patient". If one is not a registered patient, one cannot be guaranteed access to NHS treatment.

I am sure that the Minister will try to spin the fallacious line that people do not have to be registered with a dentist to access NHS dentistry. However, Ministers fail to say that a patient who is not registered with the NHS and needs emergency or other treatment has no guarantee of being able to obtain it locally on the NHS. Indeed, in my constituency it is normally nigh on impossible to obtain it at all.

Let me give an example. This very morning I was pleased to welcome to the Palace of Westminster pupils and teachers from Somerford school. One of the teachers said that, within the past fortnight, a 10-year-old Chinese pupil at the school who needed to have a tooth extracted had to travel all the way from Christchurch to London in order to obtain access to NHS dentistry. That is a vivid, appalling local example of what is happening in practice.

The key to access to NHS dentistry is registration. That is why sensible people want to enjoy the security of being able to register with an NHS dentist. Surely it is not asking a lot for citizens of the fourth richest nation in the world, who pay large contributions to the NHS through tax and national insurance, to be able to register with an NHS dentist. However, the percentage of the population aged 18 and over who are registered with a general dental surgeon in the high street has declined to 39 per cent., and the percentage of those aged under 18 registered with a dentist has fallen to 54 per cent. That means that some 39 million adults are not registered with an NHS dentist, and some 6 million patients aged under 18 are unregistered. Contrary to Government assertions, the proportion of registered NHS dental patients—both adults and children—is declining. That is supported by a recent report from the Consumers Association, which found that 49 per cent. of NHS dental practices in England could not offer an urgent appointment for unregistered patients, 58 per cent. of NHS practices were not taking on any new NHS patients and only 8 per cent. of dental practices were able to offer an emergency NHS appointment within 24 hours.

Within the last fortnight, Robinson's dental practice in Castle street, Christchurch, has given three months' notice to all its NHS-registered patients that they are to lose their registration. It is offering instead private treatment, funded through regular Denplan payments, which start at £8 per month. Robinson's is the latest in a long line of dental practices in my constituency to have adopted that approach. It is not that those dentists do not support the NHS; they do. The problem is that, under this Government, the NHS is not prepared to support them in their aspiration to provide a high-quality professional service to their patients, even when they are funded by the NHS.

This morning, talking to the group from Somerford school, I spoke to Mrs. Sue Read. She is one of those who have received the letter from Robinson's dental practice, and she is concerned about what she is meant to do now. Will she be able to get access to an alternative NHS dentist, or will she have to pay the £8 per month? She pointed out that that is only the start, because if she and her husband, who is also registered with that dentist, want treatment beyond the regular inspections, they will have to pay for that on top. That is the reality of the problems faced by my constituents. I hope that the Minister can explain what they should do, and give some specific advice to Mrs. Read.

Meanwhile, the Government are offering the prospect of a new NHS dental production line in new premises funded by capital grants from the NHS, to be staffed predominantly by dentists recruited from overseas. Why are they putting minimal effort into retaining existing, well qualified and respected NHS dentists, while providing capital grants for new facilities staffed by foreign-trained dentists willing to engage in lowest common denominator dentistry? The Government's policy does not make sense unless one ascribes to them

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

the motive that they wish to drive patients and their providers into the private sector if at all possible, and to produce a substitute, lower-quality service for those who cannot afford that or do not wish to move.

It would be wrong to suggest that all foreign dentists are not up to scratch, but it would also be wrong for the Minister to close his eyes to the many instances in which foreign dentists have been found seriously wanting in their professional standards. Mrs. Holsworth of Scarborough challenged the Prime Minister about the issue on 30 March, citing the example of three dentists recruited from overseas: the first went home with a criminal record, the second turned out not to be qualified and the third made so many mistakes that he was sacked. I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) and, in so doing, to congratulate him on his great victory in a constituency in which NHS dentistry is a big issue.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I do not know whether this problem is particularly associated with seaside constituencies. Is my hon. Friend aware of the situation that has arisen in Scarborough since the one that he referred to, and which was exposed last month by the *Yorkshire Post*? Polish dentists on full pay are not being effectively deployed because there is a shortage of chairs for them to work in. Is that not yet another example of the waste of NHS funds?

Mr. Chope: That is another example of the chaos caused by the Government's policy. Existing dentists cannot obtain new contracts or even details of new contracts, and foreign dentists are being brought in who, as my hon. Friend says, are not even being properly and effectively deployed.

I have heard stories from as far away as west Cornwall of embarrassing incidents of foreign dentists failing to meet British standards. Why, people ask, are the Government driving British-trained dentists out of the NHS while welcoming foreign dentists with open arms? The prospect of a new dental practice in Fairmile, Christchurch, which I understand from my local primary care trust is to be opened soon by Integrated Dental Holdings, may seem superficially attractive. It is obviously better than nothing for people who have been deprived of their NHS registration, but I do not believe that it is the complete answer to the problem that the Government are creating for themselves.

Under the headline, "Mass NHS uncertainty," the current edition of *Dentistry* magazine reports:

> "Up to two thirds of dentists remain unsure about the future of NHS practice . . . One third are likely to convert to private practice and a further third are still deciding".

What more evidence does the Minister need that the Government have lost the confidence of UK dental practitioners? I do not believe that dentists want to abandon the NHS, but they cannot equate Government demands that they work harder for less money and maintain proper professional standards and patient care. Indeed, Robinson's dental practice makes that point in its letter to the patients who they are now saying can no longer be on their list as NHS patients. It says:

> "We have postponed making changes for several years, in the hope that the situation would improve. However, fundamental changes planned by the government indicate that the situation is likely to deteriorate further.
>
> Under the circumstances, we feel that the practice has reached a crossroads. The NHS no longer allows us to keep the practice viable, nor provides our patients with the high quality care that we wish to offer. As a result, I will no longer be offering NHS services to adult patients from this September."

That is a cry for help from a dental practice that has held out in the hope that things would get better, perhaps having been seduced into thinking that the Government's actions would follow their words but now realising that that will not happen.

For years, the Government have denied dentistry a fair share of increased NHS spending. Like other colleagues, I was shocked to hear from John Renshaw, chairman of the executive board of the British Dental Association, that although spending on the NHS as a whole has increased by 75 per cent. in the past 15 years, spending on dentistry has risen by only 9 per cent. How does the Minister justify that?

In the current year, the total net NHS budget for dentistry is £1.6 billion, which works out at about £27 per person per year—a paltry sum when set against the vast tax take of the NHS and the increased national insurance contributions imposed by the Government. The Government are crowing about the fact that that sum is some £4 per person per year higher than last year. Is it any wonder that NHS dentistry is in such crisis?

There is also the stealth tax of increased NHS patient charges, which is yet to be revealed. In 2003, the Government commissioned the Clayton report into dental charges. It has been sitting on the Minister's desk for the best part of a year. When will it see the light of day? Why has it been so delayed?

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Chope: No; I do not have time.

Does the Minister accept that the report could lead to a massive increase in patients' financial contributions to dentistry from the current levels of about £5 million per annum?

As at July 2004, patients liable for dental charges paid 80 per cent. of their dentist's fees, which ranged from £3.50 for an X-ray to £297.70 for a fixed orthodontic appliance. The maximum patient charge for one course of treatment was £378. We understand that the report is likely to recommend substantially increased charges, inherent in which are increased stealth taxes. When will the report be produced, and why has it not seen the light of day so far?

When will the Government publish an enforceable protocol for the employment of foreign dentists? When will the Government accept that the surest way of being able to realise the Prime Minister's pledge of ensuring universal access to NHS dentistry is to enable everyone to be registered with an NHS dentist and for the Government to provide from their expanded NHS resources funding needed for the purpose?

My final point relates to dental training. The Government have presided over a substantial decline in the intake of pre-clinical students into UK dental schools, which was as high as 937 in 1996–97. The Government are now talking about creating a new dental school. Will the Minister give an assurance that it will be centred at the university of Southampton, which has put together a coherent and persuasive case for funding and development? Or was the Government's commitment to expand dental training merely pre-election salesman's puff?

My constituents are angry. Dentists are angry. The people are angry. The Minister now has the chance to set out a fresh and coherent policy to address these concerns and to reject the ill-judged comment of the previous Secretary of State for Health, now Secretary of State for Defence, in a press conference launching the White Paper, "Choosing Health: making healthy choices easier", that NHS dentistry had been "sorted."

NHS dentistry needs sorting urgently. I hope that this debate will spur the Government into action.

1.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Liam Byrne): I congratulate the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) on securing the debate. It is a pleasure to respond to him this afternoon. He will not remember this, but some years ago, when I was a humble student of political science researching the emergence of competitive tendering under the Thatcher Administration, I spent a great deal of time familiarising myself with his former work, and he did me a very great kindness in his former role as a Minister by spending time with me to help me to complete my dissertation. He will be delighted to learn that it came top of the class. I also learned that there is a great centre of expertise on this subject in Wandsworth, and I am pleased that all that expertise has been brought to bear in this afternoon's debate.

In the time allotted to me, I shall reprise the Government's approach, as the hon. Gentleman requested, before addressing some of the issues that he raised, not least the urgent issues that affect Christchurch, about which I was concerned to hear. He is right that there are crucial challenges and important concerns that must be confronted if we are to improve NHS dentistry. The Government's ambition is to do that not only in Christchurch, but throughout the country.

Our policy for effecting that transformation is extremely ambitious, to say the least. We propose the biggest programme of investment in, and reform of, NHS dentistry since the service began in 1948. Execution of that policy rests on three foundations: unprecedented new levels of investment; a new relationship between the NHS and dentists, expressed in local commissioning arrangements and in the new contract; and extraordinary new efforts to increase the number of dentists working in and for the NHS.

Let me first highlight the investment that is being made, because it will be of some comfort to the residents of Christchurch who are in part at the heart of our debate this afternoon. Last July, the former Secretary of State for Health, now Secretary of State for Defence, announced the unprecedented investment of £368 million. That means that funding for NHS dentistry is set to increase by 19 per cent in the financial year 2005–06, compared with spending in 2003–04. That is an extra spend of £250 million.

We have always made it clear, however, that that investment must be accompanied by reform. Central to that reform has been the devolution of commissioning, not to the man in Whitehall but to local health professionals who are in touch with the day-to-day needs of their local communities. At the heart of our plan to spend this new investment is the devolution of £1.6 billion to local primary care trusts, which will use their devolved budgets to ensure that local expenditure on dentistry is spent in accordance with local needs.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I have a question to ask the Minister. If he cannot answer it today, I should be grateful for a written response. How much of that money has been earmarked for Wales? Presumably, there has been an increase in the Welsh block grant to ensure that we can resolve the varied difficulties and debilitating problems that there are, particularly in rural areas. As in Christchurch, people simply cannot access NHS dentistry because none is available.

Mr. Byrne: Those figures are not at my fingertips, so I will ensure that I write to the hon. Gentleman with that information.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): The Minister is talking about the funding going to the local sources, so to speak. It is interesting that dentists are waiting for the base contract but that has been delayed and delayed and delayed, while in the meantime an enormous effort has been put in on PDS contracts. Dentists are beginning to wonder whether that is the way that the Government wish to go—contracting dentists through PDS contracts alone and moving away from the traditional service, which allows a more mixed-economy approach.

Mr. Byrne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point and for the contributions that he has made in the past about fluoridation, which has been extremely important and is now enabled by the 2003 health legislation.

The best test of the position dentists are taking towards the new contract is what they do in practice. Already, 25 per cent. of dentists have signed up to the PDS. The Government statement has already been made to ensure that, together with the proposed changes to regulations on charges that will be subject to affirmative resolution in both houses, the contract will be across the piece by April next year.

The PDS contracts between PCTs and individual dental practices promise a great deal. They have been successfully piloted across the country and dentists are already taking up that new way of working, because it removes them from the treatment and paperwork treadmill. The figures to which I refer have been particularly successful in places such as Cheshire and Merseyside, and South Yorkshire, where more than half of the practices are signed up to the PDS.

[Mr. Byrne]

The third important element of reform is the commitment to the increase—

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank the Minister for his answer, but it was not the answer to the question. I was asking whether the Government intend that national health dentistry will be provided by PDS-contracted dentists, hospitals and teaching hospitals only.

Mr. Byrne: Will the hon. Gentleman intervene again? I did not quite understand where he was going with that.

Sir Paul Beresford: To a cynical dentist the Government's drive appears to be that the draft contract has not come—it has been wait, delay, wait, delay, wait, delay—and in the meantime, a huge effort has been made to promote PDS contracts. The cynical dentist assumes that the Government are moving down the road of providing NHS dentistry by PDS contracts or by hospital services, be that through teaching hospitals or otherwise.

Mr. Byrne: The cynicism is perhaps misplaced. Although there have been delays, some were inspired by the recommendations of the National Audit Office and some by comments made by colleagues. Indeed, earlier this year the BDA and, I think, John Renshaw welcomed the fact that a slight delay had been injected into proceedings in order to ensure that the biggest reform of dental services since 1948 was conducted in a correct and effective manner, but also in a manner that allows primary care trusts the time and space to ensure that value for money—a subject that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Christchurch are familiar with and pioneers of in local government—was embedded in the new arrangements. My understanding is that the delays have been simply in order to ensure that the implementation of the new policy, which is important and far-reaching, is got right.

Martin Salter: I welcome the Minister and congratulate him on his recent appointment. I intended to make a helpful intervention, but I have decided otherwise given that the Minister is clearly on top of the brief. Given the cataclysmic effect of the implementation of a renegotiated dental contract by the previous Government some time in 1992, which saw a significant number of NHS dentists go across to the private sector, why has it taken the Government nearly eight years to come forward with proposals to deal with a problem that has been around for a long time and where there is clearly precedent and a track record?

Mr. Byrne: We make no apologies for the scale of our ambition for change in dental services, although the drift to the private sector highlighted by my hon. Friend began under the previous Administration, compounded by the 7 per cent. cut in fees that was part of the new contract.

The best response that I can give is to point my hon. Friend to some of the basic statistics over the past eight years. If one considers the number of dentists in the system in 1997, which was 16,387, and compares that with the number in 2005, there has been a 22 per cent. increase, to 20,000. There have never been as many dentists practising in this country. Let us also consider the number of adult registrations. In 1997, there were 19.7 million. That figure changed as the period of registration was altered down to 15 months. However, if we look at the increase in registration under the new recording statistics, they show an increase of 180,000. The numbers increase in four out of the six years for which data are available. There has been consistent progress in the number of dentists employed, the number of adult registrations and the number of treatments that have been made. It was the Government who commissioned a report into the viability of the future work force, and that in turn prompted the unprecedented investment announced last year by the then Secretary of State for Health.

To conclude, I want to turn to a number of the important local issues raised by the hon. Member for Christchurch. It is important to stress that investment, reform and new practices are arriving in Christchurch. Dorset and Somerset strategic health authority, which covers the hon. Gentleman's constituency, was allocated £814,000 capital and £349,000 revenue of the £50 million central funds to improve access to NHS dentistry for people in those counties.

The plans for the local primary care trust are set out in the dental action plan.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byrne: In the interests of making two more points, I will plough on, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

The dental action plan is wide-ranging and ambitious. It involves a degree of international recruitment, but at the centre is the proposal for six PDS-based contracts to be implemented in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It involves three new practices and the expansion of three more. The three extra dentists would involve something like 6,300 extra registrations. If we take the global proposal for delivering PDS services in and around Christchurch, that is a potential new registration number of about 26,000. If we look at the specific example of Robinson's dental practice at 1 Castle street, today something like 2,500 adults and 994 children are registered at the practice.

Tomorrow, there will be a meeting between local practitioners and the Department of Health to go through some of the problems that emerged in the PDS proposals put to the Department earlier this year. If that meeting is successful and people are satisfied that the proposals constitute value for money, the local PCT's proposal is to migrate the NHS registrations to the Whitecross dental care practice, which is about a mile away, where there are five full-time dentists providing capacity for about 10,000 patients. My specific advice to the hon. Gentleman's constituent would be to look to Whitecross towards the end of this week, when the proposals are finalised.

Mr. Chope: Why have the Government driven Mr. Robinson out of NHS dental practice?

Mr. Byrne: It is a red herring to pretend that the Government are in the business of driving dentists out

of NHS practice. If we consider the overall number of dentists practising in this country, the trend is clear. The fact that the number of dentists has increased by 22.6 per cent. since 1997 speaks for itself, as does the increase in the number of registrations.

Mr. Chope *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Byrne: Although the hon. Gentleman shakes his head, he must remember that that is in sharp contrast to the figures under the last Conservative Administration, when in 1992 adult registrations fell from 21.8 million to 19 million and a bit: a decline of 2.1 million registrations in the space of about four years.

In conclusion, the Government's approach—for investment, reform and international recruitment to plug the gaps that we inherited—warrants and promises good news for the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Christchurch.

Niger Delta (Development Policy)

1.30 pm

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to raise the issue of the Niger delta region of Nigeria, particularly so early in the new Parliament. Nigeria has been held as a beacon of democracy for the rest of Africa, and the Commission for Africa points to it as an example of democracy for the rest of the continent. For that to be true, the delta region must be stable, or the fate of Africa's largest democracy will hang in the balance.

At first glance, Nigeria appears to be a prosperous nation, enjoying its first decade of democracy and looking forward to another democratic presidential election in 2007. Under President Obasanjo's leadership, the country has become stable. His anti-corruption drive is to be applauded, but there is still progress to be made.

Through my work with the Niger delta group and with the help of various stakeholders in the region, I have discovered that although Nigeria has massive oil wealth, its oil is also a main source of myriad problems in the delta. Oil accounts for 80 per cent. of Nigeria's revenue and 98 per cent. of its exports, and many thousands of jobs are linked to the oil industry. Shell in Nigeria produced 1.3 million barrels of oil a day in 2004, which was up from 910,000 barrels a day in 2003. It is therefore easy to see why many people assume that Nigeria is a rich country that does not need any assistance from the international community, but we must not accept that rosy picture of it as a prosperous, democratic, oil-producing nation.

For the ordinary people living in the Niger delta, life could not be more different. The advent of massive oil companies has brought not the promised prosperity but poverty, pollution and state-sponsored militia violence, but the picture is not all bleak. The international community is beginning to recognise that something must be done to help the Niger delta. Even the setting up of the Niger delta group and the plan for MPs to visit the delta has given people in the region hope that their plight is finally being taken seriously by western Governments. It is also vital that the Nigerian Government should address the problems to ensure long-lasting peace.

A recent positive step toward securing peace in the delta was the start of the Ogoni-Shell dialogue. Representatives of the Rivers State government, Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People issued separate statements last week announcing their commitment to a structured process of reconciliation aimed at drawing in all sections of the Ogoni people. The statements came after the President appointed the Rev. Father Matthew Hassan Kukah as facilitator in the reconciliation process. He will be assisted by the International Centre for Reconciliation at Coventry cathedral, which has been particularly helpful to me and others in the setting up of the Niger delta group. The people of Ogoniland have, like many other communities in the region, suffered immensely over the years, and there has been widespread mistrust.

Important as the statements are, they do not mean that peace has been secured, but they are an important first step to demonstrate the feeling that something has

[John Robertson]

to change in the delta for peace and stability to be given a chance. I seek the Secretary of State's assurance that his Department will do all that it can to help the peace process, particularly by supporting the vital work of the ICR at Coventry in encouraging all sides to talk through their difficulties and work together for peace instead of resorting to violent means of protest.

The problems brought about by the influx of oil companies in the delta are interlinked and complex, and tend to fuel each other in cycles of tension and violence. The most obvious are environmental damage, community tensions, bunkering and small arms problems. The overriding theme with all those problems has to be the Nigerian state and its failure to provide for or engage with its people who live in the delta. Without the support of the Nigerian Government and the guarantee that the 2007 elections will be free and fair in the delta, no amount of work by non-governmental organisations or foreign Governments will secure peace in the region.

To explain the problems further, I wish to highlight the environmental impacts associated with oil production, such as gas flaring and oil spills. Gas flaring is the burning off of the gas produced when oil is drilled, and takes place round the clock very close to communities all around the Delta, sometimes only a few metres from people's candlelit homes. Recent global estimates indicate that the flaring of this associated gas in Nigeria accounts for about 20 per cent. of the total gas flared in the world, releasing some 70 million tonnes of carbon dioxide annually into the air.

The practice of flaring has been prohibited under Nigerian law since 1984, but it is far more cost-effective for oil companies to make the flare continuation payments—commonly referred to as fines—levied on them by the Nigerian Government than to find better ways of using the gas. Unless the Nigerian Government tighten up enforcement, that harmful practice will continue and the amount of flared gas will increase as oil production levels increase as projected.

The second significant environmental impact of oil production is that caused by oil spills and pipe leakages, which has led to the destruction of the only means of making a living that many people had—fishing in riverine areas and farming the land. Official figures indicate that there are, on average, 300 spills or leaks a year, but many estimate that the figure is much higher. The pollution is now such that the land is unworkable and the rivers are filled with poisoned fish, leaving whole communities with no means of providing for their families.

Oil companies pay compensation to communities for drilling on their land, but that brings its own problems. It creates a culture of dependency on oil company handouts, as opposed to a peaceful and independent existence based on traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming. The oil companies pay such compensation to what are known as host communities, which are those immediately next to where the companies operate. Designation as a host community means substantial benefits in the form of compensation payments and other development assistance such as schools and clinics. Competition for recognition as a host community has created significant intra and inter-community tensions that frequently result in violent conflict.

The Nigerian state should be supplying such facilities for its people, but the oil companies have taken on the role of quasi-states, providing for the basic human needs of communities. When they feel that they have provided enough money or facilities to justify operating on the land, they—fairly reasonably, one might think—cease to provide for those communities, leaving them feeling betrayed and abandoned.

The presence of the oil companies and their quasi-state role has served only to worsen the ethnic tensions in the delta. Ethnic and tribal tensions are inherently linked to the abject poverty there, where only 27 per cent. of households have access to safe drinking water, two thirds of Nigerians live on less than a dollar a day, and the destruction of farming and fishing means that there are no legitimate means of social mobility.

The people of the delta are resourceful, and were independent and hard working before oil production polluted their land and created a culture of dependency on oil company handouts. There are few legitimate employment prospects for the average young person in the delta. There are no resources for setting up small businesses, because of a complete absence of micro-credit. As a result, there are large numbers of disaffected and disillusioned youths in the delta with nothing to do, no money and no legitimate means of earning any, and, hence, no status in society. Political leaders have exploited that. They have actively recruited, paid and armed local youths in order to secure their political and economic interests. The consequences of that political manipulation were felt particularly strongly in the Rivers state in 2004, when fighting between armed gangs, which at one point were supported by senior members of the state government, spiralled out of control.

Unless there are alternatives for these young men, they will continue to engage in militia activities linked with the bunkering of oil, and that will lead to an explosion of violence. That is particularly pertinent in the run-up to the 2007 federal and state elections, as the jostling for positions of power has already begun. Armed youths are used by local politicians to intimidate Opposition supporters and the local population in order to secure an election victory.

I urge the Secretary of State to look at the situation that young people in the delta face, and to recognise how easy it is for them to be co-opted into a life of violence. I also urge him to look at what long-term development initiatives could be started in the delta, to work with the non-governmental organisations that are on the ground there and to support development projects. As I have mentioned, the lack of any form of micro-finance makes it impossible for people to set up small businesses; perhaps the Department for International Development could assist with that, so that people can pursue sustainable and profitable livelihoods.

In recent months, it has been reported to me by people returning from the delta that the situation with the militia gangs is heating up considerably. Many commentators believe that the delta is about to explode, and if that is to be prevented something must be done about it very soon. Whereas only a few years ago these

gangs were fighting each other with small knives, handguns and home-made weapons, now they have AK47s and many other heavy weapons. Therefore, gang warfare has taken a serious turn for the worse. This new influx of arms has been funded by bunkering, which leads me on to the final problem that I wish to highlight.

Bunkering is the theft of crude oil at source. It involves tapping into pipes and diverting the flow of oil to barrels belonging to the bunkerers, which are then shipped offshore and transported mainly to west African countries, but also much further afield to America and Europe. The sums made from bunkering are immense, as is the scale of operations. Industry figures estimate that 100,000 barrels of oil are stolen every day; 10 per cent. of daily output is therefore lost to oil theft.

Given the current price of a barrel of oil even at black market prices, it is clear that bunkering is big business. Many of the gang rivalries that I have mentioned have been linked to bunkering, as rival leaders fight for control of bunkering routes. Bunkering money is also used to buy arms for the gangs. Therefore, we can see how bunkering is fuelling tribal tensions in a number of ways.

As I have said, the importance of a stable Niger delta cannot be overstated, yet neither the media nor the British Government have paid much attention to the region. That is beginning to change, and it should be welcomed.

We have a window of opportunity to make a real difference and secure a stable Niger delta, but in six to eight months that opportunity could be lost. The run-up to the 2007 federal and state elections could either cement democracy in Nigeria or cause a massive explosion of militia violence in the delta, leading to untold bloodshed and massive instability for the rest of Nigeria—Africa's largest democracy.

Nigeria is to be applauded for its courageous move to democracy, but the reality for the people in the Niger delta is not rosy. In the 2003 elections, there was widespread vote rigging in the delta, enforced by heavily armed militia youths employed by political candidates, including members of Obasanjo's ruling party. Unless things improve, feelings of disfranchisement from and abandonment by the Nigerian state will fester even more. That, along with the massive amount of small arms and the poverty and general civil unrest that exists there, is a recipe for disaster. It would be a disaster not only for the delta but for Nigeria as a whole.

In addition, if we view Nigeria as the vital part of Africa that it clearly is, we must act now to secure peace and stability in the country. As we prepare for the G8 summit in Gleneagles, and as all eyes turn to what we are going to do to help Africa, we must not take for granted the country of Nigeria, and assume that its vast oil wealth and democracy are a reality for all its citizens.

Finally, the issue in the delta is no longer how much oil money the region is getting proportionate to its population. If it were indeed the case that the delta was receiving a disproportionately large percentage of oil revenue compared with the rest of Nigeria and that that money was genuinely getting to the people, we would not be having this debate. The reality is that poverty is widespread and that some form of reaction is inevitable. The people do not feel that they are being listened to, and if that does not change, violence will be almost inevitable. If Nigeria turns to revolution, what are the consequences for Africa?

If we cannot solve the problems of, and help support, a country like Nigeria with all its oil wealth, what chance do we have with Africa as a whole? How can we solve the corruption of a continent if we cannot solve the problems of just one country?

I hope that I have not been too negative or alarmist in my analysis of the situation in the delta. Much progress has been made. However, it is important that we are all aware of the reality of the situation. I am concerned about the meagre progress that seems to have been made following the Adjournment debate secured this time last year by my former colleague Bill Tynan. I press the Secretary of State for a firm policy commitment from his Department with regard to the Niger delta.

1.46 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Hilary Benn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) on securing this debate and on making an outstanding speech. I am left with little to add in describing the situation in the Niger delta.

I welcome the opportunity to focus the attention of the House on this very important part of a very important country. The compelling picture painted by my hon. Friend clearly draws greatly on his knowledge as acting chair of the all-party group, and I pay tribute to him and to his colleagues who are working hard to ensure that we focus more on what is happening in the delta for exactly the reason that he outlines: what happens in Nigeria is of huge importance to the future of Africa as a whole.

I wish to begin where my hon. Friend left off. As Nigeria has such great oil wealth, many people have a perception that it is a wealthy country, but the truth is that it is one of the poorest countries in Africa. Its GDP per head is only $350. It is a very poor country. Why? It has a population of 133 million, 60 per cent. of whom live in absolute poverty, on less than a dollar a day. Nigeria is also home to one in 10 of the world's HIV-positive population. That is not the case because Nigeria's HIV infection rate is especially high; 4 million people in Nigeria are HIV-positive, but it has a large population.

As Nigeria has so many poor people, what happens there is crucial to the achievement of the millennium development goals in Africa—getting children into school, reducing the number of mothers who die needlessly in childbirth and the number of children who die needlessly of preventable diseases. Significant outside help will be needed, including action to solve Nigeria's debt problems. It is worth reflecting on the fact that Nigeria—a very poor country with a GDP per head of only $350 and with 60 per cent. of its population living on less than a dollar a day—currently pays far more to the rich Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations in debt repayments every year than it receives in aid. I call that an unsustainable debt burden, especially when children are dying unnecessarily.

My hon. Friend alluded to the fact that that country, which has suffered so much, has a long and complex history, and I share his view that it is beginning to take

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steps to address the consequences of decay, dictatorship, bad governance and poverty, which have been created as a result of its history. One of the big issues in Nigeria is that there is both the federal state and the states; it is a very large country. At federal level, a very ambitious programme is being led by President Obasanjo and his colleagues, which includes a crackdown on corruption, to which I will return later. It is important that we acknowledge the progress that is beginning to be made in Nigeria, and it is important that that is recognised by the international community.

One of the manifestations of that recognition is the fact that we are responding by increasing the size of our aid programme; we are doubling it and, if progress continues, we shall treble it. Relatively speaking, given its population of 133 million and its poverty, the country is under-aided. One of the main reasons why is that many donors left Nigeria during the military dictatorship because, frankly, it was a hard country in which to work.

The Niger delta is hugely important to the future of the country. It is about the same size as Scotland and has nine states, a population of about 20 million, more than 40 ethnic groups speaking 250 dialects and 3,000 communities. Some 70 per cent. of its population lives in rural areas. It is also one of the world's largest wetlands: 80 per cent. of the delta floods every season. The coastal states include vast areas that can only be reached by boat, yet this swamp is where most of the oil is produced. The area has particularly suffered from successive military Governments, as well as from the sense of isolation and of not being listened to that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Of course, the delta is also a rich source of oil. The vast majority of Nigeria's oil—2.3 million barrels a day—comes from the delta, and it accounts for 70 per cent. of the Government's revenue. As many of the 20 million people in the delta live in poverty, do not go to school and suffer from ill-health, what happens there will be hugely important. However, we have to be absolutely honest with ourselves and each other: unless we tackle the violent conflict and the insecurity that has beset the region and, through that, address its development needs, there will not be the progress that we all want and the delta will not have the better future that its people desperately desire.

John Robertson: Does the Secretary of State agree that we have a very short time scale in which to act? Once the country is in the run-up to the 2007 election, the last thing we would want is to seem to be trying to influence that election. The next six to eight months are therefore vital in trying to help and support the country.

Hilary Benn: I accept that point, although the truth is that these are deep-seated problems. As I shall explain, the solution requires fundamental change. If I really thought that there were things that we—the international community and the Government of Nigeria—could do to sort out the problem quickly in the six to eight months to which my hon. Friend refers, I would be more optimistic about what might be achieved, but in all honesty, I think that we are talking about a longer haul than that, for reasons that I shall come to now.

Despite the problems to which my hon. Friend referred, it is a fact that, overall, the Niger delta does better than the rest of Nigeria when it comes to school attendance, particularly for girls, literacy and access to clean water and proper sanitation. For example, 20 per cent. of children in the Niger delta have been fully immunised against killer diseases. That seems pretty low to us, yet it is better than the national average in Nigeria, which is 13 per cent. In the north-west of Nigeria, the figure is 4 per cent. So in the context of the whole country, the Niger delta is in some respects better off, although I accept entirely my hon. Friend's point about corruption and violence. The collapse in immunisation rates in Nigeria over the past 20 years is in part a consequence of the fact that donors who were there have said, "We're off." Why? They have done so because of the corruption, military dictatorship and violence that the country has suffered.

At 63 per 1,000, child mortality in the Niger delta is at half the national rate of 121 per 1,000. That is not to say that there is not a great deal more that can and should be done. However, on funding, we have to acknowledge that the nine states that make up the Niger delta receive a higher proportion of the national cake than other states. The Niger delta has 13 per cent. of Nigeria's population, and it gets 30 per cent. of state revenues. The issues are how the money is used, corruption and the governance of the area. In addition, because the states in the area are oil-producing, they benefit from community development support from the major oil companies.

I recognise completely that without security improvements in the Niger delta, sustainable development will simply not be possible. My hon. Friend referred to the bunkering of oil, and a vicious cycle of violence, criminal behaviour and corruption is associated with that theft. Thousands of people have been displaced and many people have been killed. The Nigerian Government, who in the end have primary responsibility, need to take decisive action to halt the violence, stop the flow of small arms into the region and provide more effective policing at community level.

In response to my hon. Friend's specific point, the UK Government are providing support to the excellent work of the Coventry Cathedral International Centre for Reconciliation, which I commend. The centre is working with the Nigerian authorities to try to broker agreements, including one between the Shell oil company and the Ogoni people.

A second thing that we have to recognise is that without better governance things will not change. For too long, the authorities that have responsibility for providing basic services such as roads, health care and education have failed the communities that they are supposed to serve. Funds from central Government intended for development—let us remember that 13 per cent. of the population gets 30 per cent. of state revenues—have been diverted. Improving transparency and strengthening the anti-corruption drive in the Niger delta are essential.

At federal level, the Government are taking forward the fight against corruption. As we speak, a former Education Minister is facing charges for trying to bribe members of Parliament to vote him a bigger budget. He is now on trial. The former leader of the Senate is currently facing charges, and two judges were recently

sacked for corruption. In a society where corruption had been endemic, it requires political courage to take the problem on, to change the way in which things work and to make people realise that that is not the way things have to be. Without such a change, we will not get the fundamental difference in people's lives that we want.

In that respect, we should bear in mind Nigeria's support for the extractive industries transparency initiative, which was launched by our Prime Minister just over two years ago. It is based on a very simple principle: oil and mining companies should publish what they pay to Governments, and Governments should publish what they receive from mining and oil companies. If there is such openness and transparency, people have the chance to start asking their Government, "What have you done with the money that you got from the oil wealth? What have you done with 30 per cent. of state revenues?"

If a democracy is to work, the Government must have the capacity to deliver and people must have the expectation that their Government will act on their behalf. Good, accurate information about the resources available and where they have gone is fundamental to an effective debate about the choices that need to be made. I welcome the steps that the Government of Nigeria are taking. The oil companies operating in the delta need to assist in that process by publishing details of all payments made to the Nigerian Government, and they should obviously take action to deter illegal oil bunkering.

On the environmental concerns, my hon. Friend is absolutely right about the damage caused. Gas flaring is a very important issue. The Nigerian Government have vowed to end gas flaring by 2008. I understand that Shell says it is unlikely to be able to make progress until the following year, but it is important that it does make progress, because the Niger delta is responsible for 19 or 20 per cent. of world gas flaring; that tells us how big the problem is. Action also needs to be taken to rein in the criminal gangs.

Finally, I turn to what we are doing. We are promoting the extractive industries transparency initiative. The Government have set up their Niger Delta Development Commission, but frankly they have to ensure that the money is spent effectively. We are seeking to support a coalition of non-governmental organisations that can work to demand better governance. I hope that that will include work in the delta. The European Commission has been doing some work, and through the World Bank universal basic education help is being provided. We support both those bodies.

In the end, the issue is the responsibility of the Nigerian Government. As things change, we will be prepared to do more work in the delta, but the circumstances have to be right to allow that to happen. The people of the Niger delta really want that change, because that is the only way in which their lives will improve.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 June 2005

[DAVID TAYLOR *in the Chair*]

Licensing Act

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Watts.]*

9.30 am

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): I am grateful to Mr. Speaker for this invaluable opportunity. During my 13 years in the House I cannot remember having an Adjournment debate that has attracted more interest in the outside world. That is a measure of the concern that is now felt throughout the land about the Licensing Act 2003.

"In my view, we are in danger of having a wholly disproportionate attitude to the risks we should expect to run as a normal part of life. This is putting pressure on policymaking, not just in government but in regulatory bodies, on local government, public services, in Europe and across parts of the private sector—to act to eliminate risk in a way that is out of all proportion to the potential damage. The result is a plethora of rules, guidelines and responses to 'scandals' of one nature or another that ends up having utterly perverse consequences."

Those are not my words; they are those of the Prime Minister during one of his first major speeches since the general election, at the Institute for Public Policy Research on 26 May. What a relief it was to discover that he is indeed thinking what I have been thinking for a long time. Understandable concern about antisocial behaviour that is fuelled by alcohol in our towns and cities is having "perverse consequences" for local communities. The Prime Minister gave the example of a village in the Cotswolds that had to remove a seesaw with an unblemished safety record because it fell foul of an EU directive on playground equipment for outside use.

The Licensing Act means that villages in every corner of the country, not just in the Cotswolds, will say goodbye to the traditional touring circus, see more village shops go to the wall, watch local sports clubs forgoing much-needed income and lose their village halls, despite no accidents, no antisocial behaviour and nothing worrying having occurred in, outside or even remotely close to them.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): I remind the Chamber that the Prime Minister's example was wrong because there is no EU directive to prevent playgrounds from having what they want.

More pertinently, during my eight years as Member of Parliament for Worthing there has been no complaint to me about drinking in the golf club, in church halls and so on, and I suspect that the same applies elsewhere. The problem arises with young people in licensed premises on high streets, where the regulation does not have a major impact. I am worried about small businesses on which it does have an impact.

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Peter Luff: That intervention may have been slightly longer than you wanted, Mr. Taylor, but it nicely summed up the theme of my speech. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

I do not argue against the idea of simplifying and rationalising the licensing laws by bringing together the provisions on entertainment and alcohol. I expect that the new provision will make the lives of many larger commercial organisations simpler and make it easier for enforcement authorities to deal with antisocial behaviour, which is often caused by alcohol, especially in major urban areas. However, there has never been a riot at a circus, and circuses do not offer alcohol to their audiences. Village shops do not offer their customers entertainment other than local gossip and have never been the cause of a drunken rampage. Local sports clubs, which often rely on their bars to provide income to support their activities, have never provoked major disorder. The village halls I know that provide venues for both alcohol and entertainment for local people have never caused scenes of carnage or outrage.

To control some imaginary terror, the Act will impose rigid and unworkable bureaucracy on circuses, increased costs on village shops and sports clubs, and unbearable responsibility on the volunteers who care for village halls. On top of that, local authorities are struggling to keep up with the burdens placed on them by the Act and by the way in which the Department has handled its implementation.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): On village halls, does my hon. Friend agree with the correspondents who have written to me from the management committees of Dickleburgh and Morley St. Botolph village halls in my constituency that the Act is confusing and likely to put some halls out of action? Does not it suggest a lack of understanding by the Government of the problems facing rural areas?

Peter Luff: There is consensus among those of us who are worried about the Act, and my hon. Friend summarised some of the points that I want to make towards the end of my speech about the impact of the Act, particularly on village halls. I entirely agree with what he said.

It would have been good to have had a reply to my letter of 10 March to the Minister who was then responsible for the Act. I raised serious concerns on behalf of Wychavon district council about the publication of application forms, regulations and fees and about communication between the Department and local authorities. In the light of the deadline of Saturday 6 August there should be serious concern about the low rate of response for applications to convert existing licences. It seems that there will be a late rush and woe betide anyone who submits their application too late for it to be checked.

Errors mean rejection and the burden and cost of a brand new application, copied with all supporting documentation to seven other regulatory bodies and advertised expensively in local papers. Local authorities that have received a significant number of applications are having to reject many of them because of inaccuracies. That is fine now because there is time to

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put the matter right, but it will be a problem if an application is made too close to the deadline of 6 August. The Department has not done enough to publicise that important date and, as a result, even commercial organisations, never mind the volunteers who run village halls, are cutting it fine.

My first main point concerns circuses. I had a full debate on the subject in this Chamber on 27 April last year. I shall not rehearse all that I said then, but for the benefit of the new Minister I repeat that circuses, which already bear a heavy burden of legislative inspection to protect public safety, are perfectly happy to adapt to a new licensing regime. However, the cost and bureaucratic rigidity of the proposal may make touring with a circus virtually impossible. Local communities, often small villages, for which the only live performing art that ever comes near them is the circus, will lose out and a great British invention will be put in jeopardy.

The root of the problem is that the Government told circuses that they would be exempted from the legislation but broke their word and took no account of the needs of circuses. Fairgrounds were exempted; I have struggled for months to understand the logic in that but cannot begin to do so.

I have had two meetings with representatives of the circus industry and the previous Minister. I was encouraged by what I thought was the growing understanding in the Department, but nothing has happened to address the concerns expressed and, as implementation of the Act draws closer, the situation is getting much worse.

The Minister advocated that local authorities should license land on which circuses could then perform without an additional licence. Leaving aside the fact that many circuses rely on private, not public, land for their sites, that idea seemed worth exploring, but local authorities have taken a different view of the Act. Following a decision by West Berkshire council, all applications by circuses to other councils have been refused. A precedent has been set which other licensing officers, who are lost in a vacuum until new procedures are set, have been only too ready to follow. On Thursday 28 April, the licensing sub-committee of West Berkshire council dealt a potentially fatal blow to the Government's cunning attempt to find a way out of the mess that they had created.

In the words of the circus concerned:

"Two objections to licences for a circus—from the parish council and the fire brigade—were satisfactorily dealt with but the licences were still refused because a plan of the premises was not submitted as required by section 17(3) of the Act and the application did not comply with regulation 23 of the Act (which deals with the nature of plan required)."

The circus told me:

"Our intention is to hold Premises Licences for circus venues without specifying a detailed plan of the circus ... in the application. In this way, the licence can exist unchanged for the future. Safety authorities have been satisfied with our voluntary condition to supply a detailed plan 28 days in advance of each circus visit.

The West Berkshire sub-committee considers the Act is prescriptive in requiring a detailed plan with the application. As well as the circus tent, the plan must include locations of exits, details of fire safety equipment, furniture, items in fixed locations like seating and the circus ring, which is likely to include major props or rigging e.g. safety net, tight-wire etc. The same will apply to many other events where equipment is installed, which might include staging, safety barriers etc.

A licence granted would therefore only be valid as long as nothing in the plan was changed. The layout of any circus is likely to change annually for example when equipment is updated, when a new act installs a major prop, and when new legislation requires it.

The new applications we have so far made have cost an average of £500 each. For a circus visiting 40 venues each season, this is a considerable outlay. While it will be possible to retain the licence and apply for a licence variation to accommodate the changes, the procedure for obtaining a variation is almost as involved as a new application."

That problem is common with village halls. The circus continued:

"If a detailed plan is required, it will not be possible for a local authority to hold a licence. This does not only apply to circuses: every separate event in a local park or any other area will need its own licence for each individual event. Thus the DCMS objective for Local Authorities to license their own land cannot be achieved in the light of this judgement."

I believe that a legal challenge is planned, but I could not obtain up-to-date information and it may even have happened. What a mess the Government have got us into; it is even worse than we predicted. I wrote to the Minister last week asking for a meeting to discuss the specific issue and I hope that he will agree to meet a small delegation from the circus world before we rise for the summer recess. After all, the problem now goes beyond circuses to all activities that take place on local authority land.

In that context it is worth mentioning just how worried are the organisers of local festivals such as the Bromyard gala. The complexity of the rules and how to avoid punitive licence fees of many thousands of pounds for these events are matters that tax the ingenuity of very professional organisers. I think that I am right in saying that if a band plays at the gala from the bandstand but there are no chairs in front of it, that is fine, but if chairs are put there and people listen, it becomes a licensable event. The location of the bandstand in relation to the beer tent is a matter of great importance in determining what licence is required and how much it costs. What a farce.

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As well as the impact of the Licensing Act, is my hon. Friend aware of the impact of the Private Security Industry Act 2001? These Acts create a double whammy for the Coleford music festival in my constituency—a volunteer-run festival—putting a huge burden of cost on it. The future of the event is in jeopardy.

Peter Luff: We see the common theme that is beginning to emerge in the debate: the cost on volunteers' shoulders above all else—I accept that circuses are professional organisations. There is already a very heavy burden on volunteers in the organisation of such events; this additional responsibility for many of them is either financially or organisationally intolerable.

Small village shops are finding life pretty difficult as it is with death by a thousand regulations and Government policy changes, plus unfair competition from the big supermarkets. Benefit changes have hit post offices and many have had to comply with

demanding disability legislation. The general burden of regulation and stealth taxes—minimum wages, new rules on part-time employment, even the climate change levy—has steadily increased. The next threat is the brilliant scheme of the Office of Fair Trading to allow supermarkets to buy newspapers and magazines direct from the publishers, which could destroy the viability of the local newspaper delivery network in rural England.

It is against that background that the impact of the Licensing Act must be judged; it puts another nail in the village shop's coffin by making it much more expensive to obtain licences to sell alcohol. For example, in order to sell alcohol, the modest Bishampton village store in my constituency now faces an initial bill of £120 and an annual bill of £40 based on its rateable value of £4,200, where it previously had a £30 bill for 3 years: £10 a year. The alcohol sales there generate little, if any, profit; it is more of a service to help villagers and maintain that precious commodity, footfall, for the other things that the shop offers. Now it risks becoming an unaffordable loss leader.

Meanwhile, down the road in Evesham, Tesco, which has a rateable value of £1.2 million, faces an initial bill of only £725 and an annual fee of £225. It has a rateable value some 250 times that of Bishampton's small village shop, but a fee a little more than five times that of the shop. Where is the justice in that? Whatever happened to the Government doctrine of rural-proofing policy?

It is not just village shops that are worried. Westminster city council has told me of its concern for hundreds of smaller, independent traders, and in particular ethnic businesses, shops and restaurants that are still struggling with the process in London.

There was no rural proofing for village halls either, which brings me to the major theme of my speech. They are perhaps most at risk from this Act. The same village hall that has often benefited from large lottery grants in recognition of the benefits that it brings to the community it serves has had its death knell sounded by the Department that oversees the lottery: the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We must remember how important the village hall is in rural life. Many hon. Members have raised the matter with me in advance of the debate, and I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) for what he said about village halls in his constituency. There is a strong consensus among Members who have village halls in their constituencies about the problems that the Act will cause.

One village hall in my constituency has held about 80 events in the last year of which the new laws would require a licence. Those included dances, dinners, plays by the local drama group and groups sponsored by the county council, garden produce shows, church fêtes, social barbecues, private parties, wedding receptions and charity events raising money for the air ambulance and hospices. Our village hall hosts events for the Mid-Worcestershire Conservative Association, too.

My constituent Roger Ockenden told me:

"Our Parish Plan shows villagers rate in order of importance 1) the village shop; 2) the Village Hall; 3) the village pub."

I hope that No. 4 is the church, but he did not say that. He concludes:

"This new statute will ensure the total breakdown of village life."

Another of my constituents, Rupert Segar, summed up the situation in a letter:

"The volunteers who help run village halls are unlikely to want to shoulder the burden of responsibility for supervising the premises for the sale of alcohol. The costs in licence fees and training will be extortionate. The limit of 15 days for temporary event notices will squeeze the life out of many rural communities."

He wrote that after attending a meeting 10 days ago in Bishampton hall attended by representatives of a total of 12 village halls from around my constituency. They heard an authoritative explanation of the new law from officers of Wychavon district council, but—and this is no fault of those excellent officers—the audience were more concerned and confused afterwards than they had been before.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I would like to take the opportunity to explain to the Minister that my constituency has 32 villages, many of which have village halls, and all those halls are having these difficulties. That is in one constituency in Surrey alone; multiply that figure and we can see the size of the problem.

Peter Luff: It is fair to say that of the representatives of the 12 village halls in the room for that meeting, one left after five or 10 minutes because their hall was so small that it was not affected by the Act, but theirs was a particularly small hall. The other 11 were all terrified by what faced them, and I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

The old system worked well. It was easy to apply for a community premises licence costing only £27, and for a series of occasional licences costing only £10 and valid for up to 12 events. It ain't broke, so why are we fixing it? The more we delved into the process, the more problems we discovered. To start with, apparently, and bizarrely—the Minister may put me right on this—the safety requirements of the new licences are less onerous than those of the old ones because electrical and fire safety certificates no longer have to be produced.

When it comes to licences for alcohol, it is only the sale of alcohol that is controlled. A wedding reception where the booze is free does not need a licence, but one with a cash bar does. In theory, I know which of those is more likely to lead to public disorder; the one where price is not rationing consumption.

The essence of the problem is threefold. First, the cost of the new licensing regime is much higher. An application fee for a typical hall is around £190—it could be much higher for a bigger hall—plus about £60 to add alcohol to the licence, which is waived if the application is received and approved before 6 August. Moreover, for a typical hall—again, it could be much larger—there is an annual fee of around £180. If one wants a variation at a later date, there is the huge cost of advertising and sending all the relevant documentation to seven different public bodies. That advertising has to be expensive advertising in local papers covering a wide area, not affordable, or perhaps even free, advertising in the local parish newsletter or magazine that covers the area the hall actually serves.

Secondly, there is the bureaucratic nightmare. The forms are complicated and the conditions difficult to understand. For the volunteers who run village halls

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that alone is bad enough. In fact, one person at the meeting admitted that she had just thrown the forms away because she could not understand them. She took another set as the meeting ended.

Thirdly, and perhaps most worryingly of all, there is the huge burden of responsibility that must be borne by one person, the designated premises supervisor, if the hall decides to put alcohol on its licence. That one, named person, who must be trained at a cost of at least £100, probably more, and then pay his or her own licence fee too, will bear responsibility for ensuring that the terms of the licence are complied with and will face criminal sanctions if they are not.

With many halls having 30 or 40 licensable events a year, and the busier halls having up to 80, that is an intolerable burden. It is difficult enough to find volunteers to run village halls as it is without that burden; this is now a job that no one in their right mind would volunteer for. What a way to celebrate the year of the volunteer.

Another possibility is to hand over the running of the bar to the local publican, who will supply trained staff and take a good cut of any profits—hardly an attractive option, given the tight budgets with which village hall committees, and all the other people and voluntary groups who use the halls, have to work. Another alternative is to restrict the number of events to 12 over a maximum of 15 days by using temporary event notices. However, that will sharply reduce the rental income of many halls below the level of viability. As Crowle village hall told me:

"The limitation of twelve TENs per calendar year is the key problem in our particular case. We hold some 26 events per annum involving the sale of alcohol. The letting income from these events is a significant part of our total income. We cannot afford to discard this source of income so we must accept the additional cost of the Act and raise our letting rates to cover the increase."

Temporary event notices are needed to modify any term of a new licence, not just to sell alcohol. If, for some reason, one wants a later night for the village pantomime than the standard licence allows, that is one of the 12 TENs gone. If the application goes beyond midnight, that takes two TEN days out of the total allowance of 15, not one, because anything after midnight is counted as a new day.

If someone were to decide not to put alcohol on the new premises licence because they expected to rely on 12 TENs for the events that they organised, what would happen if someone who hired the hall took the TEN for his event? The premises will have lost one of those nights, which will put the holder of the licence in real trouble.

Another constituent, Peter Charlesworth, wrote to me:

"The law is now so expensive, time consuming and complex that really it is not worth the effort for many small organisations to bother to try and fund raise. There will be no profit at the end of the day. The income for both organisation and Hall will suffer . . . If the local publican becomes the licensed premises controller, many of the village functions will be too small to warrant carrying alcohol and employing staff. He will refuse to support the event. The function will then be either illegal or will not happen . . . Many small functions which attract only a few people, to get a TEN, will have administrative costs of nearly £2.00 per head—a lot out of a £4.00 ticket."

That is the problem for small communities and events. The Government just have not understood it.

It is not just village halls, by the way; I am told that even farmers markets are at risk for similar reasons. It seems that if wine is sold—I am sure that we all want to encourage English wines—those markets will need a full licence, and all the burden of cost, bureaucracy and responsibility that applies to village halls will apply to them too. That reminds me: it is not even clear how the new Act affects the traditional bottle stall at a village fête, another great English tradition that is apparently under threat from unthinking regulation.

There are similar problems for sports clubs. They have faced a raft of expensive legislation, much of which is justified, such as that dealing with child welfare, health and safety, and new electrical requirements—the list goes on. Now they are faced with the Licensing Act. Richard Wood, the chairman of Ombersley cricket club in my constituency, tells me that the club has 120 juniors who play cricket and 80 who play football, with a further 100 senior members for cricket and bowls, and 300-plus social members and parents. The bar is a major source of income for the club and largely funds all the junior activities. In fact, it represents more than half of the total income of the club.

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of the effect on other sporting bodies? Newbury and Crookham golf club in my constituency has estimated that it will cost up to £1,000 to process the licence. That will have a devastating effect on its income.

Peter Luff: I am hugely encouraged, and I am glad that I gave way to my hon. Friend because the figure that he gave is exactly the figure that Ombersley cricket club quoted to me. It says that the licence is so central to its functions that it will have to use professional advice to shape its application. It cannot afford to get it wrong. It reckons that, taking the professional advice and fees together, the cost will be £1,000. To be fair, Richard Wood tells me:

"The bottom line is that the club can afford to pay this money, but it's money that won't then be available for equipment and machinery to support the junior boys and girls playing football and cricket."

For many village halls, the Act could be the kiss of death. For many sports clubs, it is a brutal kick in the teeth.

What is to be done? Of course, few local communities will suffer each of these hammer blows, but every child who loses the opportunity to see traditional live entertainment at a circus will have missed out on something valuable. Every village shop that is forced to put up the shutters for the last time takes something precious from the community that it served. Every sports club that restricts its activities with young people will cause deep sadness among those who understand the value of encouraging sporting activity, and every village hall that curtails its activities, or even closes, strikes a real blow to the sense of community that makes England's villages what they still are.

"There is usually a seductive logic to any new regulation. There is almost always a case that can be made for each specific instrument. The problem is cumulative. All these good intentions can add up to a large expense, with suffocating effects. Sometimes,

we need to pause for a moment and think whether we will not do more damage with a hasty response than was done by the problem itself."

Again, those are the words of the Prime Minister in the excellent speech that I began by mentioning. There are solutions, such as new exemptions for circuses, small shops, community-based activities and the charitable trusts that often run village halls. That may take primary legislation, but there is now a hole in the Government's programme because we do not have to ratify the European constitution, so there is time for an emergency Bill. I urge the Minister to pause for a moment and think, to quote the Prime Minister,

"whether we will not do more damage"

to local communities

"with a hasty response than was done by the problem itself."

He must delay the so-called second appointed date, when the legislation goes live—currently expected to be in November—and conduct an urgent review of an Act that deserves to be put out of its misery.

David Taylor (in the Chair): There are five Members who wish to speak. Members should bear it in mind that I intend to call Members to make winding-up speeches at half-past 10, and restrict their comments appropriately.

9.53 am

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on securing the debate and on the typical passion and vigour with which he introduced his case. In the few minutes for which I seek the Chamber's attention, I intend to complement what he said by concentrating on pubs and the licensed trade.

I will begin by praising the role of council licensing officers, whom the hon. Gentleman referred to. When I worked in local government some years ago, licensing was relegated to a fairly minor function. I remember that, at Leeds city council, where I worked, it was adjacent to the cemetery section. However, in recent months and years, that has changed. In Selby and York, which are the two councils that I represent, there are two outstanding licensing officers: John Lacy in York and a gentleman by the name of Tim Grogan in Selby, which has caused slight confusion. I know which individual the pubs are most concerned with at the moment and it is not their local MP; it is their licensing officer. Both licensing officers are doing a splendid job. They go around Selby and York, without employing any great bureaucracy, and encourage licence applications to be made.

It is interesting to look at some of the figures in Selby and York. In Selby, of the 400 licensed premises that will need licences, 10 per cent. have passed through the entire system and 75 per cent. of those—30 of them—have applied for variations on their licences. On the whole, that has been for the odd extra hour, often at weekends. Ten premises have just converted their licences. There has been no need for any hearings in Selby at this stage. Everything has been done through delegated powers. There is a confidence there that the licence applications will be made and that the deadlines will be met.

In York, rather more than one in seven—107—of the 725 premises have gone through the system. Forty applied for variations and 67 for direct conversions. There have been three hearings so far in York. There are one or two cause célèbres, one of which is in my constituency. It will no doubt go to a hearing of the licensing board soon. According to evidence from the parish council, the Charles XII pub, which is in the student area of Heslington, has not been particularly good in its relations with the residents down the years. It has not necessarily adhered to its public entertainment licences and has had people still revelling in the garden after midnight, which is against council regulations.

Given such cases, hon. Members and Ministers can expect that, as with a controversial planning application, there will be local controversy and various factors will need to be weighed at a licensing board. However, from the evidence that I have seen in my local area, it is a misleading characterisation to say that no applications are being made or that licensing boards will not be able to cope with the number of hearings that they will have to hold. Across the swathe of middle England that I represent, people are quietly getting on with implementing the Act. In many cases, there are no objections whatever to variations in hours. As both licensing officers remind me, the councils in Selby and York, like all councils, have strong powers to bear down on pubs that abuse the extra hours that they are granted, and no doubt they will use them. I am encouraged by that.

I am the chair of the all-party beer group. It is a tough job, but someone has to do it and I hope to be re-elected. Incidentally, I hope that we can maintain our status as the largest all-party group. The annual dinner is coming up in July and prior to that we intend to do a survey of local authorities, on an all-party basis, to look at how many applications they are getting and what problems they are encountering.

In terms of both councils and pub companies, there will be little sympathy—certainly in the case of the pub companies—if applications do not go in on time. The pub companies have big resources and they need to get themselves organised, as most of them are, to get their applications in on time. Equally, there will be little sympathy with councils that are over-bureaucratic in their approach to licensing. If they are turning down applications because of minor errors on forms, rather than just making a quick phone call and getting the necessary amendment, people will not sympathise when well known and well run pubs are closed down for a period. There is an onus on both councils and pub companies to make this work, and on the whole they are doing so.

I welcome the Minister to his post. It is good that the licensing function has stayed within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. As a Back Bencher, I can say that the implementation of the Act has not been without problems. There have been creative tensions between the Home Office and the DCMS and that has led to some of the delays. However, I, for one, am pleased that the function is staying at the DCMS. The Home Office sometimes views the licensed trade purely in terms of antisocial behaviour; the function is in the right place.

There is an onus on both the Department and councils to publicise what is going on. The pub companies and big chains will be all right, but there are also smaller, independent pubs, sports clubs, which have been mentioned, and late-night refreshment houses outside London, which will have to apply for licences for

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the first time. There needs to be an awful lot of publicity and effort over the next few months to generate those licence applications.

There is a related agenda of antisocial behaviour and the various measures that the Home Office is introducing in conjunction with the Act. Some of the measures are welcome, such as fixed penalty notices for trying to buy alcohol under age or for selling alcohol to people under age, and powers for the police to close down pubs that persistently serve people who are under age. However, I urge Ministers to be careful with the concept of alcohol disorder zones, which was in our little red book—the manifesto. The implementation of that concept requires great care.

An alcohol disorder zone represents a breakdown in the partnership between the police, the licensed trade and councils in an area. With a levy on licensed premises in an area where there are alcohol disorder problems, the zone could be characterised as a business improvement district in reverse. Is it fair that all licensed premises in a particular area, even those with no record of trouble, have to make a payment? Who decides when an alcohol disorder zone is lifted or imposed? Should the decision be made by the bodies that benefit from the extra revenue? One or two of my colleagues have told me that their town wants to be the first to have an alcohol disorder zone. I again urge caution. The zone would not be a badge of pride, as it could attract the wrong sort of people and destroy a town's reputation for its hospitality industry. The measure should be one of last resort; we should not pepper the country with such zones and impose burdens on well run businesses.

There is a quiet revolution taking place throughout middle England. People are applying for extra hours, and on the whole they are getting them and no one is objecting. That is good, because of all the nations of Europe, surely it cannot be just the English and the Welsh who cannot be trusted to have a quiet drink after 11 o'clock at night. The day when people can drink after 11 o'clock will come—hopefully—in November. The date should not be put back. The pub trade is certainly not asking for either the date in August or the date in November to be put back. Indeed, if it were, it would be a very quiet Christmas and new year in terms of pub opening hours, because the previous provisions would no longer apply. It is essential that those provisions of the Act are introduced on time, and there is every reason to have confidence in their being implemented with good consequences. There will be the odd difficulty and the odd local hearing that causes controversy, but that is as it should be. It puts power in the hands of local people, which is where it should be.

10.3 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan), but I must say to him that it will be a quiet Christmas and new year in many village halls throughout rural England and Wales if we are not careful. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on securing the debate and on his comments. He covered the ground extremely well. I shall reiterate two areas that he discussed, and I shall mention one other.

I am no great fan of the Act. When it was introduced I spent quite a lot of time campaigning against it, to the extent that a sort of west country fatwa was declared by the Wurzels, no less, on the then Minister in the Department, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), when he made disparaging comments about folk singers in Somerset. At that time we were concentrating largely on the risks to live music.

I want to discuss the effect of the Act on communities. The Act is having a direct effect on village shops, which stock, as a small part of their business, a few alcoholic beverages. They are sold as a service, more than anything else, to the shop's customers, for which the shop has an off-licence. It is not remotely feasible economically for shops to continue to sell alcoholic beverages under the new licensing regime. It is having a negative effect on villages and on individuals who have to drive to another village or the nearest town to buy drinks, with all the possible dangers that that entails. There is also a danger to the viability of the shop. Those effects are all of little benefit to the licensing regime, and they run entirely against the principle that we have heard espoused many times in the House of keeping village shops as a viable and visible presence in our villages.

The threat to village halls that the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire mentioned is serious. I have two examples in my constituency. First, the representatives of a substantial village hall, Beckington memorial hall, have written to me. They are extremely concerned because last year they had 27 events with a licensed bar but this year, because of the way in which the temporary events licensing system works, they are restricted to 12 events. That is having a serious effect on the financing of the hall as a centre for village life, and that is replicated in village halls throughout my constituency.

Secondly, at the other extreme, a small village hall, the reading room in Charlton Mackrell, does not serve alcoholic beverages. It is a small reading room that was set up by a beneficent incumbent to provide a place for quiet reading and recreation for the village. It holds Women's Institute meetings, parish council meetings, art classes for some elderly residents and a Christmas panto. Its officers have had to go through all the nonsense of paying a surveyor to provide detailed plans of the building to continue their entertainment. They have had to pay for the cost of licensing, and they will have to pay for the recurrent costs of maintaining the licence.

We are talking about volunteers who run small premises because they think that it is a vital part of village life. Confronted by two copies of a 21-page form and a further 64 pages of explanatory notes, there comes a point when they say, "Forget it. I'm sorry, but I'm not prepared to spend my life reading explanatory notes rather than doing what I want for the purposes of my village."

My final point is about something that is perhaps unique to Somerset, and something with which many hon. Members may not be familiar. It concerns the Somerset carnival tradition, which has been going for 400 years. The carnival circuit in Somerset is massive, attracting on average 500,000 people a year. The biggest carnival is the Bridgwater carnival, which on its own attracts more than 100,000 people. It is one of the best kept cultural secrets in the country, because people are

simply not aware of its scale. When I first came to London and saw the lord mayor's show, I thought, "What on earth is this pathetic excuse for a carnival?", compared with Bridgwater carnival and the Somerset circuit.

The carnival circuit is under serious threat from the Act, not because it does not exempt moving vehicles but because carnival comprises not only moving vehicles but walking exhibitors, marching bands and many others for whom it would appear that a licence may be required. The district councils in Somerset have got together this year to try to interpret the law, but they cannot do so. They have taken legal advice, which says that carnival may be all right this year. "May be" is not good enough for the thousands of people throughout Somerset who work all year to prepare the floats. Carnival raises an enormous amount of money, and the licence fee, if required, is £64,000, which will kill carnival stone dead. The councils have asked for guidance from the Department, but it is unable to provide any, other than to say that some carnivals may be exempt but others may not.

It is not worth the risk of being taken to court because of one person's complaint about the carnival for whatever reason. The organisers risk hefty fines of £20,000, prosecution and a prison sentence of up to six months. Of course people are not prepared to take that risk. We could lose an important and vital tradition in my county, and I am not prepared to stand by and let that happen. I hope that the Minister is today able to provide a definitive view on carnivals. If he cannot, it suggests that there is a gap in the law that must be corrected at the earliest opportunity.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. Four Members are seeking to catch my eye. If contributions are confined to five minutes, all four will be called.

10.10 am

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): In Bridgend, everything is in place: our licensing committee has been expanded, we have additional sub-committees, members have been trained, and training has been provided to the trade to ensure that applications can come in. There does, however, seem to be a problem with getting applications in. I accept that that is an issue. The local authority has done its best—back in February, there was a four-page article in our local newspaper. There is no problem with people knowing what they have to do, but there does seem to be a problem with them actually doing it.

I have been here before because, before I entered the House, I was a member of the Care Standards Inspectorate. Many volunteer organisations had to submit applications to that inspectorate to be registered as domiciliary care agencies. Exactly the same situation arose. We were told that they would not apply. What happened was that, despite the fact that we were available to give advice and guidance for months, as the licensing people in my local authority are, on the last day of registration those organisations were queuing up at the front door. It caused chaos. Applications did come in, but people must understand that their movement through the application process can be eased if they apply early.

That is the message that we must get out there. We must get the message out that there is support from the local authorities, that licensing officers are willing to sit down with people to make sure that they do not get their application wrong, and that if applicants can get their application right and get it in they can move through the process. Changes will almost certainly be needed to the application form and the Minister might be able to consider them. Experience always brings improvement.

What worries me in my constituency are the small shops that local people are frightened to approach because gangs of youths hang around outside them, urging adults to go in to buy them alcohol. My local residents want the Act in place and want the police to have the power to prosecute those youngsters. At the moment, the police suddenly descend on local shops and put a cordon up at the two ends of alleyways because they know that, at the back, youngsters who have intimidated the staff in the shops and people going into the shop, asking them to buy alcohol for them, and are drinking illegally. The Act will help to reduce that problem.

Supermarkets must also lead the way and set an example. The trade has been given advice and must help local and small organisations to move forward so that the Act, which can tidy up many anomalies, can be put in place effectively and in time.

10.13 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I shall not attempt to give any more than the briefest history of this wretched legislation, partly because of the time, but also, Mr. Taylor, because I do not wish to try your patience.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on introducing the debate. As he rightly said, we have all been here before. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), I served on the Standing Committee that considered the Bill. We had a good time talking about the alcohol issues, many of which concern Westminster city council. Many people did not realise the great implications that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire rightly pointed out for the range of village hall-related events. The issue has the makings of an absolutely horrendous mess. In Committee, we gave repeated and persistent warnings that there were great inconsistencies between the proposed liberalisation of alcohol licensing and the Home Office agenda on binge drinking and antisocial behaviour. What the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) referred to as "creative tensions" are, I fear, somewhat more than that.

The legislation as a whole is unrealistic. It has been driven by the large-scale alcohol and entertainment industry. Even in my constituency, in places such as Soho and Covent Garden, one of the interesting things is that many of the smaller, family-run businesses—the bars and restaurants that have been around for 50 or 60 years—are, as appalled by the Act as many of the residential population.

It is impossible for us to Europeanise the drinking habits of people in this country simply by changing the hours of operation. We need only to consider the experience of places such as Scotland and Ireland to

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realise the impossibility of that goal. I can assume only that the measure was led by the large-scale alcohol and entertainment industry, which rammed it through and probably paid large sums to Government funds. As with the Gambling Act 2005, there was a commitment to try to make radical changes without thinking them through.

We have also seen the undermining of a well-balanced undertakings regime. I have worked closely with the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Frank Dobson), because we share responsibility for part of Covent Garden. In the past, undertakings have been given by a number of pubs, bars and restaurants. That has worked extremely well, but that regime is being swept away and there threatens to be something of a free-for-all that will affect the balance in our neighbourhoods. The issue is not simply one for central London and the hot spots of coastal England; it has an impact throughout the country, along the lines pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire.

The new Minister has an opportunity to wield a new broom. I do not think that he realised when he took on the post how the Act was likely to blow up in his face. He may know that, in the last few weeks, I have tabled questions about the flexibility of the new regime and about how much consultation has taken place. It is clear that, when the transition period began in February 2005, there was an opportunity for consultation with local authorities, licensing authorities and people who required licences. At this stage, I am not aware that many changes or recommendations have been made by the Government in consequence.

My view is that, potentially, we have an absolute mess in the making. I would like there to be a delay of at least eight months to allow licensees adequate time to complete the complex and overly prescriptive application procedure that has been dictated by the new Act. The problem is not simply going to occur on Saturday 6 August; there will be a problem in November. I fear that even local authorities, such as mine in the city of Westminster, that are well organised and used to large-scale and important licensing arrangements will face a massive logjam in the second half of the year. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Government will give serious consideration to delaying implementation to allow for the full implications to be thought through.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) rightly suggested that, inevitably in any such process, there will be a queue on the final day. My fear is that it will be a hell of a long queue and will have an impact, particularly in this important area, in the run-up to Christmas which could be little short of disastrous. The Government's approach to the start date is hopelessly optimistic. One must consider those local authorities that are less well attuned to such matters, which will find themselves in great difficulties.

The Minister probably now appreciates that, with this Act, he has inherited something of a mess. It has been poorly drafted and has an unrealistic timetable. However, I believe that there is still time for him to take action to prevent something that is not only a public relations disaster in the making but has negative implications.

I would like to say much more, but I realise that two other hon. Members wish to make contributions. I thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Taylor, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire for introducing this vital debate at an important time.

10.19 am

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I begin by congratulating the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (James Purnell), on his appointment. We served as councillors on the same council for several years, although sadly not at the same time. I am glad to see him in his new post. In his new role, I invite him to come up to sample the many joys of Wakefield, which include our cultural attractions of the Yorkshire sculpture park and the national coal mining museum for England.

I would like to talk briefly about the two local authorities that I represent, Wakefield and Kirklees. In common with what other Members have said about their constituencies, about 10 per cent. of licensed premises in Wakefield have applied for and received the licences, and that has been a smooth process. Wakefield is known as "the merrie city" because it has a large number of historic pubs. We are also known as a place to have a great night out in the region. There is something called the Westgate run, in which people start at the bottom of the Westgate area and walk up to the top, pausing to drink in the many pubs on the way. I have never managed to complete it.

We also have a thriving micro-brewery industry, with companies such as Clark's and Fernando's breweries, as well as many small businesses. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) about the alcohol disorder zones; in those areas, a voluntary approach is always better than a coercive one. I also welcome the action taken by my local police, who support the Licensing Act 2003, and the local paper, the *Wakefield Express*, in its Streetsafe campaign.

Members have raised issues to do with the cultural change—the attempted Europeanisation of England and Wales. I welcome attempts to introduce a more adult and European approach to alcohol. I also welcome the Act for what it does about under-age drinking. Members of all parties will have come across articles in their local newspapers about minors buying alcohol; it happens every summer. If we are talking about gateway drugs, then we should acknowledge that alcohol is the first and the major gateway drug: it leads to all sorts of antisocial behaviour, and also to drug use and drug abuse. I welcome the fact that the Act allows us to take tough action. We know which are the problem premises in our constituencies, and we can now shut down such off-licences, as well as those premises where violence is perpetrated.

There is also a role for regeneration and for introducing greater flexibility. That will lead to people wanting to come into city centres at night because they are less threatening places, and, perhaps, more family oriented. We have an annual beer festival in Wakefield; people from throughout the country come and sample our many different beers. The merging of the entertainment licence with the alcohol licence is also to be welcomed.

I seek clarification from the Minister on the issue of festivals. We have the Emley show in the Kirklees area of my constituency, and there was some shroud-waving about it from my Conservative opponent during the election campaign. As Members of Parliament, we need to adopt a community leadership role in this regard. Instead of saying, "It won't work," we should say, "We can do it; we can get this in on time." As for stressing that people have, for example, eight or 10 weeks left, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) said, we must acknowledge that leaving things until the last minute is human nature—it is what people do. We always wait until the last minute before paying our credit card bills and sorting things out. I know that that is the case: I failed to pay the congestion charge a few days ago, because I left it until the last minute. I will be in negotiations on that; I might approach the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) about it. That aside, my point is that we need to adopt community leadership.

I would also like the Minister to say what the large supermarkets are doing, because there is little excuse for them not to prepare for this. I know that we in Wakefield are set up: we have three new licensing sub-committees; we have meetings booked for July; and we will have a smooth and successful transition. That is certainly what I want to happen, and I welcome the new legislation.

10.24 am

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) for her courtesy in allowing me a few minutes in which to speak. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on the way he introduced the debate, and on providing so many examples. Those of us who have concerns with regard to village halls would wish to align ourselves with his arguments.

Listening to the debate, two things have become clear. First, there is a degree of urban-rural divide. Members have brought out into the open the fact that different issues affect different parts of the country. Secondly, very few Acts are unutterably bad and do not have something within them that could be changed and made better. I join other Members in welcoming the Minister, who is a friend, to his new position, and I say to him that he now has an admirable opportunity to pick out of this legislation those things that have the potential to go very wrong, and to make a difference by saying, "In view of what has been said in the lead up to implementation, perhaps we could and should do things differently." On behalf of rural communities, I appeal to him to make a difference on the specific issue of village halls.

I speak on this subject with two hats. As the Member for North-East Bedfordshire, I commend the work done by Sue Norman of the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity with regard to village halls in our area. She has brought to their attention the problems created by the Act, and she has listened to them and reflected to me and to others the problems for village halls. Those problems have been ably outlined in the debate by Opposition Members.

I also thank Rodney Tate, the chairman of the Swineshead village hall management committee, for putting things so graphically. He wrote to me some time ago, and he also wrote to the Department. Swineshead has no shop and no pub now; the village hall is where people meet, and the bar profits are used to do things for the village. Mr. Tate wrote:

"Swineshead Village Hall is managed as a registered charity, and at the discretion of Bedford Borough Council, is exempt from charges for its public entertainment licence, and we pay only £30 for renewal of the liquor licence every 3 years, i.e. an average of just £10 pa. Under the new Act with the proposed fees, we will face costs in 2005 of £191 just to transfer to the new regime the existing licence rights with 3 joint licensees. Then we shall be faced with renewal costs of £40 . . . for the premises and £111 for the personal licences, although it is not clear how frequently the latter would be payable. All this has to come out of our annual bar profits of only £300–400 pa, on average, money that we need to maintain and improve the village hall and the church. We had been thinking of adding more joint licensees so as the share the burden of responsibilities"—

which refers to the point that has been made about volunteering—

"but that now seems too expensive to contemplate."

Such stories could be written about the 19,000 village halls and community centres throughout the land.

My second reason for speaking is that I am the shadow Minister for communities and regeneration. Wearing that hat, I ask the Minister to draw the attention of the new Minister for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Miliband), to this debate, and to ask him to consider the damage that is being threatened to local communities throughout the land because of the Licensing Act and the matters raised in this debate by Member of all parties.

Sue Norman forwarded to me a note that she received from one of the charity trustees for a village hall. It is entitled, "Who wants to be a designated premises supervisor?" The lady who wrote it comments:

"Here's the job description.

In your own time, go on a training course to get an 'accredited personal licence qualification'. (Nobody knows how long the course will last, where you'll have to go to do it, or what it will cost—but as it will cover 67 topics in 14 different categories, it's quite a big commitment).

Apply for a Personal Licence".

Her account of the job description continues:

"Agree to be the Designated Premises Supervisor for the Village Hall. This apparently means that every time there is an event where the consumption of alcohol is required—and the Hall has an average of 26 of these every year—you'll have to either sell the alcohol yourself . . . or authorise the sale of alcohol by someone else . . . You may not know these people from Adam".

She adds that the supervisor must

"be present at each event for a substantial period, be immediately contactable for the time when you're not present, and turn out if there are any problems. For most events that means being available on a Friday and/or Saturday evening between 18.00 and midnight (assuming the event finishes on time)".

She concludes:

"What on earth is the Government thinking? I care a lot about our Village Hall, and the benefits which it brings to our community. But I don't want that job, thank you".

and I suspect that there are plenty of others like her.

Two things are clear. The first of them is that the Government are determined to control, bureaucratise and centralise, almost regardless of what the issue is or the appropriateness of the measures they seek to bring

[Alistair Burt]

in. A bit of discrimination could make a lot of difference. Secondly, there is an inability to comprehend any opposition or truly to understand what is being said. The Government are often in the position of the archetypal Englishman abroad, who when faced with lack of comprehension simply shouts louder to get his point across. Sometimes, the Government should realise that they have simply not been understood, and that what they are requiring is not wanted. In this particular case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire has said, as far as village halls and local communities are concerned, there is no evidence of things being broken.

Rodney Tate concludes in a letter to a national newspaper:

"Village halls offer a vital public service, especially in small rural communities, which often have no pub, shops, post office or other social facilities. They do not suffer from the issues of crime and disorder, public safety, public nuisance and the protection of children, which the new Act is intended to address. Yet we are being inflicted with the same extra bureaucracy and high costs as for commercial premises. Does the Government really want to strike a further blow against rural communities by closing down the small village halls throughout the country?"

The Minister could strike a great blow for those communities by making some changes to the Act.

10.30 am

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): Like others, I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on calling for this debate, and on making a powerful contribution. I offer congratulations, too, to all other Members who have spoken. The hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) is perhaps more supportive of the legislation than I am; nevertheless, he rightly reminded us that if we are to go ahead with the second named date, which is in November, there is an urgent need to advertise to a wide range of people the importance of getting applications in quickly.

The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire referred to issues of concern to circuses, village halls, small shops and many other places, and he was right to do so in every single regard. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) added to that list his concerns about the important issue of carnivals—a point also picked up by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) was perhaps more supportive of the Act than I am. Nevertheless, she too reminded us of the urgent need to promote the measures and to get licence applications in as quickly as possible.

Then we heard the contribution of the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt); I will return to the issue of his village hall later. His view is that there is, to some extent, a rural-urban divide. I must say that I do not entirely agree. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) made the point that a number of the problems referred to by the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire also applied in his distinctly urban constituency, as they do in parts of mine.

The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire rightly said that of course there is merit in some aspects of the legislation. However, we really need far greater flexibility, so that we do not have to take tough measures to crack a nut that does not even exist in some of our rural communities. Sadly, however, the problems of binge drinking and their impact on local communities are growing in many parts of the country. Accident and emergency admissions related to alcohol misuse are increasing, and the number of violent episodes and violent crimes related to alcohol misuse is rising.

It is interesting that although the Government are keen on introducing lots of new legislation, existing legislation is hardly being used: on average only 11 landlords a year are prosecuted for allowing drunken behaviour on their premises. Under the new measures brought in by the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, there has been only one, failed, prosecution. The real question is whether we need the new Act, and whether it will really help solve many of the problems.

Before the Government rush ahead with all their plans, there are so many measures that we need put in place. Frankly, we need more support for the police and local authorities. We need more flexibility in the legislation for local authorities. I take as an example the last-minute agreement of the Government to allow reference to special saturation policies. When they did that, the details were not in the 2003 Act, but it is interesting that the guidance that accompanies the Act says, in relation to special policies on cumulative impact:

"Nothing in the Guidance should be taken as indicating that any requirement of licensing law or any other law may be overridden."

So we can have a special saturation policy, but it will not necessarily do very much. Given that, it is not very surprising that Andrew McNeill, the director of the Institute of Alcohol Studies, has stated:

"I think it's going to be a legal minefield".

Because of that legal minefield, a number of local authorities that are keen to pursue the potential of the measure—such as my local authority, Bath and North East Somerset council—have decided not to go ahead; they fear those legal complexities.

Indeed, the Act is full of legal complexities that are causing a nightmare. For example, can the new Minister—who I welcome to his post—tell me whether, under the new legislation, it is legal for a family to go out for the night and leave their 15-year-old child in their hotel room, which has a minibar, between 12 am and 5 am? I ask the Minister a straight question: is that legal or not? Those are the sorts of complexities that I fear he will find as he considers the legislation. [HON. MEMBERS: "He doesn't know."] Well, I will ask the Minister another one; hon. Members might be able to help him. Will it be possible for a family to send their 17-year-old son to a 24-hour supermarket to buy a loaf of bread between midnight and 5 am? I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us, because those sorts of things—whether people can get their loaf of bread at that time of night—affect local communities.

Also on complexity, the Minister is keen to press ahead with the Act, but although we have been told at the last minute that we are to have back-up measures such as alcohol disorder zones, we do not even know how they are to operate. They will be covered in the Violent Crime Reduction Bill, which has not yet been considered. How are we meant to know how all these things will relate to each other?

We need to do more about alcohol labelling. We need to build on the welcome measures of the British Beer and Pub Association, which is banning drinks promotions, although other pubs and clubs need to be advised to do it. We need more support for those who work to try to tackle the problem of alcohol misuse. We need time to sort out a lot of the nonsense. I have given some examples of it, but others have talked about the problems for supermarkets; nearly everyone who has spoken mentioned them.

The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire rightly raised the concerns mentioned by Rodney Tate, chairman of the Swineshead village hall management committee, which is in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. That honourable gentleman—Rodney Tate—has managed to express himself even more succinctly than he did in the letter that the hon. Gentleman read out. In another very good letter to *The Daily Telegraph* on this very subject, published just yesterday, he says that he had already written a letter to the newspaper about the huge increase in the fees that the village hall was to be charged, and says:

"Now we have been deluged with the paperwork for this conversion, including a main application form of 21 pages, with over 30 other pages of documents and notes to read."

He points out that he had to go to two seminars to try to understand how to fill in the form. Many other such examples could be given.

The Minister will need time to sort out the issue of temporary event notices. That will be fascinating. We understand that TENs will be issued, but we do not know how that will be done because we have not yet had the regulations. Can the Minister tell us when we will see them? Will he guarantee that there will be a consultation period before he sets out the regulations? Can he tell the House whether the official Cabinet Office guidelines for the length of consultation will apply, which would make the consultation 12 weeks? If it is 12 weeks, will there be time to introduce the statutory instrument, to consider whether to pray against it, and then to have a debate? If all that is to happen, and if we are to go ahead with the appointed date of 7 November, how will the Minister get it all in place in the time provided? As I understand it, we simply cannot do that.

Is it really the case that the only people who can object to a temporary event notice are the police, and that they have only 48 hours to do that? If so, someone who wanted to organise a rave on the outskirts of my constituency could simply shove a letter through the letterbox of the village police station, if there is one—and there are one or two around—late on a Friday night, and then have the rave on the Sunday night, with no time for the police, or anyone, to do anything about it. Have I got that right?

Can the Minister tell me whether local councils will be given more powers? Is it not daft that local councillors in whose ward an application has been made cannot be involved in deciding it? Will he do more to tell those who need to apply what to do? Frankly, a huge number of problems need to be resolved. I welcome the new Minister to his post, but from everything that he has heard today, he will see that he has a huge fight on his hands to convince many people in communities up and down the country that the Act will help them. Frankly, I do not think that it will.

10.39 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on securing this debate. As we have heard from the contributions, the problem under discussion is extremely vexatious and affects not only constituencies with a rural bent, but the industry across the board.

I congratulate the Minister on his new post. By now, he will have realised that he has been sold a hospital pass. He has the most poisoned of all the poisoned chalices not only in his Department, but across the whole of the Government. He is the third Minister with whom I have had to deal across the Floor of the House, and I say to him—the point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt)—that he has the opportunity to right a great wrong.

The Act is very problematical. In the past, Ministers did not have the necessary tight control. The bureaucrats have been allowed to run riot, and there is now an incredibly difficult situation and a time scale that does not give the Minister much room for manoeuvre. However, he has a massive opportunity to make his mark by grasping the issue by the throat, shaking it hard and coming up with something sensible that will not lead to the kind of problems that have been listed today.

We are on the verge not only of a disaster, but of a total debacle that will affect thousands of businesses and blight local community facilities, including village halls and sports clubs, to mention just a few. I am ashamed to be part of a legislature that is involved in this kind of nonsense. The situation now verges on the farcical. It is not only unfair, but, as my hon. Friends have mentioned, over-zealous and disproportionate. It is certainly over-bureaucratic, and is turning out to be very expensive indeed.

I am also embarrassed not to have been able, with my hon. Friends, to make any fundamental changes to the Bill in Committee and on Report. I regret that. We certainly won the arguments, many of which have been repeated today. However, the Government are still not listening. I am angry that we are visiting such considerable cost and inconvenience on so many businesses and individuals. We need to ask the question, "To what end?" What is the purpose of it all?

It is difficult to come up with a sensible conclusion. The old system was not doing a bad job; in fact, it worked perfectly well. There may well have been a hidden subsidy involved throughout the court system—I am prepared to admit that. However, that could have been addressed separately. Instead, we now have a bureaucratic nightmare that involves many different facets of our society.

We have done some research. In some Labour constituencies it is claimed that 10 per cent. of potential applicants have now made applications, to which I say, "Whoopee!" However, our research shows that, across the board, around 5 per cent. have done so. Only 5 per cent. of all the businesses that need to apply for a licence—all the clubs, village halls and so on—have so far come forward.

As we all know, the cut-off date is 6 August, and I do not see how the issue will be dealt with in that tight time scale. Why have applications been slow in coming

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

through? The hon. Members for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) and for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) made the point that such slowness was an aspect of human nature. That is nonsense—it is not human nature to leave one's business hanging over the edge of a cliff, waiting for some bureaucrat on the council to stamp it as okay.

The reason is down not to human nature, but to the Government. The regulations were laid on 13 January to come into force on 7 February, the first appointed day, on which the application process was to begin. Even at that stage, the forms released on the DCMS website were incorrect and had to go back because they did not conform to the regulations. Corrections were made and the forms were reissued on 7 February. It goes without saying that without the forms, the regulations relating to the plans required, the advertising requirements and other similar details, it proved difficult for businesses or councils to plan ahead.

Businesses that tried to do work in advance, particularly those that prepared plans of premises, had to revise it to ensure that the 11 different requirements that suddenly came out of the blue were met. Despite repeated requests by the Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services and the industry, and despite a promise from the DCMS, the industry is still awaiting clarification on the extent to which outside areas must be shown on the plans. Some councils still believe that all outside areas must be shown on a scale of 1:100. What is the point of sheets of paper that show the golf course, the hotel gardens or the race track? The confusion over plans is probably the single biggest issue holding up applications.

As applications were extremely slow in coming in, on 30 March a number of interested parties wrote to the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn). They included the Local Government Association, LACORS, the British Beer and Pub Association, the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers, the British Institute of Innkeeping, Business in Sport and Leisure, the Bar Entertainment and Dance Association and—the police were involved—the Association of Chief Police Officers. They wrote expressing their concern about the lack of applications and made points that could be taken on board to ease the process.

The letter suggested, for example, that a reason for the delay was a lack of awareness of the new law among licence holders, particularly among small independent businesses, largely due to a severe lack of information and publicity from the DCMS. They also mentioned the late laying of the regulations and the due date for annual fees, which have to be paid on the anniversary of the granting of the licence, and provide no incentive for early application. We have said time and again that if the renewal date were simply a year after the second appointed day, there would be no problem. However, no one will put in an application early if next year they have to pay their new fees earlier than their neighbour. That is an obvious point, made to the then Minister not only in the letter, but over and over by Opposition Members. Again, the Government just did not listen.

The letter also highlighted the need for multiple copies of applications to the various authorities responsible under the Act and the absence of a slip rule in the regulations that would have allowed the correction of minor errors rather than the rejection of applications. We have heard stories of local authorities sending back application forms because they had not been completed in black ink; the whole process had to be gone through yet again. A slip rule would have prevented some of that nonsense.

The letter also raised the implications of alterations made to licences after the first appointed day—there could, for example, be a change of licensee—and mentioned the lack of clarity about aspects of the existing law which are carried forward under the new Act. For example, there is still an argument about embedded rights; people have gone to court. The LGA believes that it can interpret them in one way and the DCMS says, "We're not sure; let the courts decide." What nonsensical legislation—it is absolutely appalling. Ministers should have resigned over this nonsense, but they have not.

In replying to the letter that I mentioned, the then Minister more or less indicated that it was all the fault of the pubs—of everyone but the DCMS, which was whiter than white. Unless this Minister gets a grip of the issue, he will have on his hands the biggest debacle for years. If the pubs do not get their licences through by 6 November, they will not be able to trade, and people will not be able to buy a drink in their local pub.

The three-month time scale from the 6 August cut-off until the second appointed day does not, in my opinion, give the time needed for the local authorities to process all the late applications. There was one example of a club that applied early and had done all its homework, but its application still took eight weeks to process because there were objections and the issue had to go to a hearing. Let us remind ourselves that no other applications were being processed by the council during those eight weeks.

If objections are raised—and they will be, without fail—there will not be time to hold all the hearings during that three-month time scale, which will mean that those who do not get their licences in time will go to court. Magistrates courts will be clogged up with people saying, "You have not processed my licence in time, and I am taking the matter to court to have it resolved." Either today or very soon, the Minister must introduce, or announce the introduction, of legislation. I do not mean legislation to move the second appointed day, because that has not been decided—November is only a possible date. However, that has to be shifted. Eight months has been suggested by Westminster—

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister to reply to the debate.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (James Purnell): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) on securing this debate, which I am delighted to have because it helps to publicise issues about the Licensing Act 2003. In particular, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising issues not just about pubs, but about other affected organisations. One of the key tasks that we face is ensuring that people who are involved with village halls, restaurants or kebab shops are aware that the Act applies to them.

This has been a constructive and well-informed debate and I will reply to as many points as I can in 10 minutes. I will endeavour to write to hon. Members about the individual points that they have made if I do not answer their questions.

It is worth mentioning briefly the reasons for this reform: it is intended to make the system more flexible for the vast majority of responsible drinkers and licensees, while giving more powers to local communities and the police to deal with those few licensees that cause problems, whether they are off-licences, pubs or other organisations. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan), I believe that the Act gives people that power and that, if we return to it in a year or two, we will find that it has had a significant positive effect.

The Act gets rid of the double madness of people having to gulp down two or three pints of beer before the 11 o'clock closing time and of their all being chucked out at the same time. It allows people in a village shop to sell a bottle of wine to someone coming home from work at 11 o'clock on a Sunday, whereas at the moment they face the problem that although they know that that person is reliable and trustworthy, they cannot sell him a bottle of wine for an arcane reason.

In implementing the Act we need to give people certainty about the framework and flexibility in how the rules are interpreted. The Bill tries to give local authorities as much flexibility as possible and we will, as we have done in the past few weeks, continue to make it clear what flexibility local authorities have in implementing the legislation. For example, we have been working with the Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services and others to make it clear that the type of plan that is submitted to local authorities depends on the organisation submitting it. If the plan involves a large nightclub in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), it may need to be of a different level than that from someone in a village shop selling a few bottles of alcohol every now and then.

Let me turn to the individual issues raised by hon. Members. We recognise that there are issues faced by circuses in making applications, and my predecessor appreciated the constructive way in which the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire raised them. We know that there have been concerns about the requirements for plans. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman as soon as it is convenient for him, and for him to bring a delegation to discuss those matters. However, in addition to that, although we cannot comment on individual cases, we will write to him shortly to see whether there is anything that we can suggest to circuses that might help them draw up plans that are sufficiently flexible while meeting the requirements of the legislation.

We have flexibility in respect of the second appointed date. In previous debates the hon. Gentleman raised the possibility of delaying that date because most touring circuses finish their touring season in mid-November and face the challenge of having to get a licence for the last couple of weeks. We will be able to delay the second appointed date to later in November. We have listened to the arguments for further delay, but have heard strong counter-arguments from the industry, police and others, and from local government. The key thing is to give people certainty, so they know that they need to apply, and to ensure that instead of continued speculation about whether we will delay the date, we focus people on submitting their applications. To give people that certainty, the second appointed date will be 24 November and we will shortly introduce plans to make that clear.

On the point raised by the hon. Gentleman, local authorities such as Brighton and Richmond are considering whether they can license sites. That would allow a number of circuses and other forms of entertainment to use that public land over the period of a year. We strongly support that and will continue to work with local authorities to make that possible, because that may be an appropriate solution to many of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman raised about circuses. It would, for example, remove the need for them to have a licence every time they went to a particular piece of land.

Turning to village shops, the new licensing regime gives grocery stores and mini-markets more flexibility and represents a business opportunity for them. It is also worth saying that the Government are trying to give support to village shops. We have introduced reform that allows the extension of the mandatory 50 per cent. rate relief from sole village shops to all village food shops in a area of settlement of 3,000 people or fewer, where the rateable value is £9,000 or less. That is a significant financial boon for those organisations and would certainly outweigh any increases under this regime.

There are some fee increases under the new regime, because under the previous regime the cost of the alcohol licensing system was cross-subsidised from the rest of the court system and, in effect, the taxpayer was subsidising the sale of alcohol to the tune of £25 million. That should not continue. Some people said that the fee system should reflect the cost of the alcohol trade overall and the cost of wider social behaviour, but we rejected that because it would be draconian. However, the cost of running and enforcing the licensing system should be reflected in the fees, which is why these increases are included in the new system.

Mr. Foster: In view of what the Minister has just said, can he explain why the escalator designed to cover those very points applies only to pubs, not night clubs?

James Purnell: The issue of night clubs is a general social one. There is a difference between night clubs and shops, for which the legislation allows an escalator. The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) made the point that under the Act a supermarket will be charged more, which was not possible under existing legislation and was asked for in this debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) on her point about the potential danger of a few off-licences and local shops selling alcohol to under-age drinkers; we need to deal with that. The Act provides for greater fines for people who do so, and we have also brought in fixed penalty notices. The Violent Crime Reduction Bill will continue to deal with that. That is an important point that we should continue to look at.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) that there is a community leadership role for us to play in respect of festivals. It

[James Purnell]

would be inappropriate for the Government to say which festivals are to be licensed. The legislation gives local authorities the flexibility to do that and local authorities are able to subsidise fees exactly as they do at the moment. It would be inappropriate for any Minister to say what Somerset or Wakefield county councils should do. I should be delighted to visit my hon. Friend's constituency to see the beer festival, and I look forward to crossing the Pennines to do so.

At the moment sports clubs need licences. Greater flexibility is built into the legislation: once people have a licence, they will not have to apply all over again. The licence will last in perpetuity, as long as they do not vary it.

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Purnell: I am afraid that I have only one minute left, so I do not have time.

In conclusion, we are doing as much as we can to publicise this regime. I have give 30 interviews on this matter already. We are launching a communications plan.

Peter Luff: What about village halls?

James Purnell: That is an important issue. We do not intend to undermine the contribution that village halls make. There is an exemption for people who, if they are not providing alcohol, will not have to pay any fee. The fees under the existing regime could be up to £600. The long-term fees faced by people will not be excessive. There is no requirement for the personal licence holder to be there at all times.

Family Doctor Services

11 am

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am delighted to have secured this debate. Today, 1 million of our fellow citizens up and down the country will go to see their general practitioner. A fact that is perhaps not stated often enough is that nine out of every 10 consultations in the national health service are with a GP: about 1 million per day. I should like to start the debate by praising GPs for the fantastic work that they do on behalf of all our constituents. I should also like to praise all their support staff. I picked up a booklet in my excellent local surgery, the Kirby road surgery in Dunstable, and noted the two doctors who have been there the longest: Dr. O'Toole joined in 1980, so he has 25 years of continuous experience, and Dr. Curt joined in 1984. I was further interested to note that there are some 23 members of staff in that excellent surgery of four GPs. It is important that we do not forget to recognise the contributions made by practice nurses, receptionists and other support staff in our surgeries.

I want first to find out whether the Government are committed to supporting general practice and, in particular, to ensuring that there is a level playing field in relation to the new APMS—alternative provider medical services—private sector arrangements for primary care. APMS need not necessarily be a problem, provided that there is a level playing field. The example from secondary care, where independent sector centres have provided treatment at a cost that is 9 per cent. higher than hitherto in the health service, is illustrative. I should be grateful if the Minister reassured me that there will be an absolutely level playing field and that the Government are fully committed to supporting and taking forward general practice, because, by and large, it does an outstandingly excellent job.

Continuity of patient care is tremendously important to so many of our constituents. However, some of what the Government have done—clearly with the best of intentions—such as the 24 to 48-hour access targets, have undermined that continuity of patient care. Patients wanting to see their own GP, who has seen their particular condition many times before, are not as likely given those targets to be able to do so unless they are prepared to wait for a considerable length of time. Could the Minister enlighten us on whether the Government are reviewing their thinking? A commitment to general practice as a whole from the Minister would be welcome.

Secondly, I should like to consider the premises out of which GPs operate. I have spent a lot of time during the past few days talking to GPs and those involved in primary care in my constituency. I understand that the ring-fencing of funding for premises has, paradoxically, made the situation worse. Many practices in Leighton Buzzard, which is the largest town in my constituency, are quite desperate to know how they are going to be able to expand their premises. I learned yesterday that one major practice is extremely upset to find out that it has lost out on the second wave of premises development funding. It had hoped to get funding, and is looking to expand its premises, but Bedfordshire Heartlands primary care trust has told it that there will be no extra notional rent to pay the interest on the mortgage that the practice would need to take out to expand the premises.

Leighton Buzzard remains one of the largest towns in the country to have no hospital—not even a community hospital or a minor injuries unit. Within the three counties to which I am closest—Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire—many much smaller towns, and even villages, have their own community hospitals. Leighton Buzzard is a large town that takes a long time to cross, after which people have a journey of at least 8 miles to get to Stoke Mandeville, the Luton and Dunstable hospital or Milton Keynes general hospital. My constituents are seriously worried about that. That worry is exacerbated because Bedfordshire Heartlands primary care trust has a £14.3 million deficit. That is the unaudited figure; I understand that it could possibly rise slightly.

I spoke to the trust's chief executive this morning, and part of the reason for that deficit is that it has made a significant commitment to the QOF funding for GPs—the quality and outcomes framework—and has put nearly £3 million towards local GP practices. I very much welcome that, of course, but the huge deficit is a worry. I understand that there is a £50 million deficit Bedfordshire-wide. We are twinned with Hertfordshire under the strategic health authority, and it is a running sore of contention among all the Bedfordshire MPs—three Labour, three Conservative—that historically, Bedfordshire has kept within its budgets, whereas Hertfordshire has often overrun. It seems to us in Bedfordshire that those overruns have become entrenched and that Bedfordshire has lost out. The hon. Member for Bedford (Patrick Hall) has raised the issue many times from the Government Benches, and the three Labour MPs joined the three Conservative MPs from Bedfordshire to see the former Secretary of State of Health to discuss the matter. That issue remains as pressing as always.

Thirdly, I should like to mention the training of GPs. The Government set a target for some 2,000 more GPs between 1999 and 2004. They did pretty well, although they did not meet the target in full-time equivalent GPs: an extra 1,750 only were recruited. I am delighted that we have those extra GPs, but it is instructive that the British Medical Association estimates that we need around another 10,000 GPs nationwide if we are to serve our constituents properly.

I am extremely concerned to learn that in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire—indeed, as I understand it, across the whole of the eastern region—there has been a 75 per cent. cut in the number of final-year, self-construct GP registrars. That is extremely serious. There were 16 in training in 2004–05, but there is now a budget across Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire to train only four. That is a significant cut in the budget. I first learned about that when I was making detailed inquiries for this debate yesterday. Could the Minister respond to that point? If she does not have the facts and figures at her fingertips today, would she agree to write to me about the matter, because if the figures are true, we will be in a difficult situation?

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): The training of GPs is highly important, and there have been cuts, as my hon. Friend is right to point out. Does he recognise that there has also been a reduction in the number of applications for GP registrar places? He might invite the Minister to comment on why she thinks that that is so. It could be owing to the reduction in the attractiveness of general practice and the commodification of primary care, over which her Government appear to be presiding.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend makes valuable points from the Front Bench, and I look forward to the Minister's response to them.

Fourthly, I should like reassurance from the Minister that her Government are fully committed to allowing GPs to practise in a variety of settings. Will she allow small GP practices with just one, two or three GPs who are providing a good service with which patients are happy to continue to practise, as well as the larger groupings of GPs? There are worries about that. I understand that it was reported at the end of March that the Department of Health's head of primary care development told a conference that a typical GP practice would in future have 10 or more GPs. Does that mean that the Kirby road surgery, which has only four GPs, will not be allowed to practise? Does that mean that Dr. Haq and Dr. Donald, who both have single-GP practices in Dunstable, will not be able to carry on practising? Those two practices score consistently highly on patient satisfaction. I would be very worried if there was any threat to our single-GP or small practices that are clearly meeting patients' needs.

I shall read some comments from a petition that I will shortly be presenting on the Floor of the House from 700 patients of a single-GP practice in Dunstable—I think that they are patients of Dr. Donald. One couple wrote:

"We feel—from our long experience—that a smaller practice is preferable, and we are not just 'names on a register'!"

Other comments included:

"To be able to see the doctor on the day you're ill is brilliant",

"I feel more at home",

"Having the same doctor each visit—fantastic",

"Keep surgeries small. It is much better for us".

I could go on and on, but that gives a flavour of the comments and of how well regarded our small GP practices are. I know that there was great concern when Dr. Evershed closed his single-GP practice in Leighton Buzzard and when a single-GP practice in Markyate, which was just outside my constituency but served a number of my constituents, also closed.

May we have a pledge from the Government that there will be no "one size fits all" definition of a GP practice? Let GPs work in the framework that suits them best. Some GPs would hate to be on their own in a small cluster and would much prefer to be with a larger grouping of 10, 12 or more GPs. Others are more individualistic and prefer the freedom and autonomy of working on their own or in a small group. We must have the flexibility to allow GPs, their practice nurses and their staff to work in the environment that is best for them.

My last point, which concerns information technology, is in many ways the most important given the financial implications. Computers are essential to every area of our life these days. The Government's national programme for information technology—I understand that it has been renamed NHS Connecting for Health—is budgeted by them to cost £6.2 billion. It is of great concern that there have been suggestions that

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that is a significant underestimate and that the true cost could be between £18.6 billion and £31 billion. Where will the extra £12 billion—or, possibly, £25 billion—budget overrun come from? My understanding is that it will be clawed back from the primary care trusts and from hospital trusts generally.

I speak as a former member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which is relevant because the Child Support Agency has been trying for five or six years to get a new computer system up and running. There have been horrendous cost overruns and much suffering to our constituents as a result. Will the choose and book system still be operational by December 2005, as the Government have promised? Why is it necessary? Why is it so prescriptive? Why, for instance, will a GP have to prescribe two private sector options? Why not let the GP decide where the best places are locally to send local patients? Has there been a proper gateway review process on the massive amount of spending on IT?

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): In the week that one of the local service providers for the national programme for information technology, which I believe is now called NHS Connecting for Health, has been sacked, does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems is the Government's failure to understand that GPs are ahead of hospital IT and not behind it? The reaction of GPs is not because of their being Neanderthal, but because they are afraid of having imposed on them systems that replace those that work but which, in some cases, have not yet even been written.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will not repeat.

Will the Minister give a reassurance that in the typical 10-minute GP consultation the national programme for information technology and choose and book will not be so onerous that more time is spent looking at a computer screen than dealing with the patient? If the cost overruns are as significant as we have been led to believe, as has so sadly happened on many Government IT projects, where will the extra money come from?

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Caroline Flint): This is my first Adjournment debate as the public health Minister and I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing it. As he rightly said in his opening words, the GP practice is the cornerstone of health care throughout England and Wales. I assure him that as the public health Minister I am keen to ensure that we continue to value the services provided at the primary level, an essential part of which are GP practices. We should also examine how we can develop those services.

In the past few weeks, I have received a number of different stock-takes on the issues that lead to treatment in the acute sector. It is clear to me and, I am sure, to everyone in this Chamber, that work at the primary end could help reduce the load on the acute sector, by ensuring that we prevent the development or worsening of illnesses which then need to be dealt with in a hospital environment. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my time, commitment and attention in this role will be very much spent examining how we can celebrate good practice. There is already a lot of good practice among GPs, in providing services directly and connecting with others to provide services for their patients. I want to make that clear from the outset. I am not the only one who signs up to that; across government there is recognition of the importance of primary care.

In the Department of Health it is clear that support for NHS primary care has never been greater. The Government's assistance to family doctor services has demonstrated itself in several ways. First, there has been an unprecedented increase in investment in primary care. Secondly, we have fostered innovation, with a greater range of services being offered to patients. We all realise, not only as MPs but as potential patients, that public information about the different forms of treatments available influences patients. In addition, as technology advances and as treatments improve, there are many more options at a GP's disposal in order to deal with an illness and to prevent one through screening or other procedures. The climate of medical advances, public concerns and public demand in which we live is very different from that when the health service started all those years ago.

Thirdly, we have increased the importance of primary care in the NHS. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are set to continue that trend. In fact, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will launch a White Paper on primary care services in July. We want to engage all health professionals—of whom GPs are an essential part—MPs, councillors, the public, community organisations and other groups to help us examine what primary care people would like locally. That is not about wholesale reorganisations but about trying to engage in health at the most local level. Some of the issues we raised in our manifesto complement that. Fourthly, we have improved the rewards for NHS workers in primary care both financially and in terms of professional responsibility, and we continue to invest more money in the NHS than ever.

However, it is not just a case of having more resources but about how those resources are used and GPs in particular feeling that they have an influence over the use of resources at their disposal. Investment in primary care health services in England has risen by a third over the past three years. That increased spending means that more GPs work in primary care than at any time in the history of the NHS.

The hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) raised a point about training. I agree that we must be constantly watchful and I will consider in more detail the issue of registrar GPs. However, the number of GPs increased by 3,752—13.4 per cent.— between 1997 and December 2004, and the number of practice nurses increased by 20.4 per cent.—nearly 3,800—over the same period. As a result, people can see GPs and practice nurses more quickly.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire talked about constituents being able to see a GP within 48 hours and a practice nurse within 24 hours and raised a concern about people not necessarily being able to see their own doctor in that 48-hour period. A small minority of GP practices do not provide longer-term

bookings, and the Department of Health, strategic health authorities, primary care trusts and practices are actively examining that together. If someone needs urgently to see a GP within 48 hours, they should be able to do so, which is why we set that target. However, given that GPs have to manage their own practices, it may not be known which GP they will see.

On the other side of the equation, people with ongoing illnesses should be able—as is the case in most practices in Don Valley—to book ahead and see the GP of their choice. In asthma and antenatal clinics, and other facilities in which there might be a specialist GP, that can be planned for. Therefore, it should not be the case, as came up during the election campaign, that people are told that only the 48-hour option is available to them. I am pleased to say that that does not happen in the majority of practices, and we are working actively with PCTs and other organisations to deal with cases where it does. As a Member of Parliament rather than a Minister, I cannot understand why most practices in Doncaster can deal with the problem through straightforward planning whereas others cannot.

Andrew Selous: Will the Minister write to me as soon as possible in response to my specific point about the cut in Eastern Deanery's funding, which has led to a reduction of 12 places—a 75 per cent. cut—in the number of final-year, self-construct GP registrars? That cut greatly concerns my local medical committee and I hope that the Minister will look into it and get back to me.

Caroline Flint: I will find out further details about that and write to the hon. Gentleman.

There are not only more GPs but more specialised GPs developing their expertise in particular areas depending on the service that they want to provide for their patients. There are also better facilities. Some 1,400 GPs with special interests deliver a range of extended services, such as dermatology, in a local setting that is convenient to patients. Since July 2000, 2,848 general practice surgeries have been replaced or refurbished as we modernise the NHS's infrastructure after years of under-investment. More money also means more services. Bedfordshire Heartlands primary care trust is investing £4.9 million this year in the treatment of people with long-term conditions, and has been developing means of care that will allow people to be treated at home instead of in hospital.

The hon. Gentleman talked about decisions on premises in his constituency, and I know that he has spoken with the chief executive of his local trust. He will be aware that a decision has not yet been taken on any premises and that the trust cannot give the go ahead to the Leighton Buzzard surgery plans independently of the other three premises being considered. I know that he is actively engaged with the PCT and I hope that the lines of communication are open so that he will feel that there is real engagement in determining the facilities to provide services to the local community and that his concerns are being addressed. No final decisions have been made but the PCT is considering the matter.

One of the Government's priorities, as I hope the hon. Gentleman is aware, is to create healthy and sustainable new communities in the south-east. There are 44 PCTs in the four growth areas of Ashford, London-Stansted-Cambridge-Peterborough, Milton Keynes and south midlands, and the Thames Gateway, and the Bedfordshire Heartlands PCT falls within that area. We must deal with housing growth and the development of health services to meet the needs of population growth. I know that the PCT is considering those issues in the medium and long term, and additional funding has been incorporated to take account of that. Discussions must take place alongside development to deal with the long-term health care needs of the communities that he and other MPs in the surrounding area represent.

We are trying to provide innovative ways to access care to meet patients' demands. The hon. Gentleman raised concerns about the independent sector and whether its involvement at primary care level would too strongly undermine the role of the GP practice. We do not want to undermine the role of the GP practice but we are examining options for other service providers, which could include entrepreneurial GPs wanting to expand. As I have said, a number of GPs specialise in certain areas of health care and may want to use those skills to provide, for example, satellite services outside the GP practice.

The voluntary sector could also be involved. As a former Home Office Minister responsible for the national drugs strategy, I know that the voluntary sector often plays a key role in helping GP practices—for example, with referrals for drug treatment. There is no prescriptive, "one size fits all" approach; it depends on what services are needed. There is not a blueprint to be handed down. We want to engage GPs in the process and are not seeking to undercut them.

Andrew Selous: In the final moments available will the Minister deal with the cost overruns of NHS Connecting for Health, which could be as high as £25 billion and may come from primary care?

Caroline Flint: The hon. Gentleman raised scepticism about the choose and book system. One reason for creating the system is that it will deliver choice at the point of referral and booking, giving patients a choice of time, date and place for a first out-patient appointment. Also, GPs will be provided with instant information to make those referrals. It is planned that some 80 per cent. of practices should be using the choose and book system by the end of 2005. The system has been implemented through pilot schemes across England and that has provided a foundation for how the service will be developed. I will write to the hon. Gentleman about the finances if that is helpful. I acknowledge that some GPs have introduced their own computer systems, but it is one thing to have a computer system in an individual practice and another to have a connected system helping GPs to help their patients.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of time. Research carried out for the Department of Health by the health information company, Dr. Foster, found that discussing the choice of hospital lengthened GP consultations by just 36 seconds. Obviously that would

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not always be the case; for a start, it would depend on the patient and how many questions they ask. However, demonstrations and testing have shown that booking an appointment with a patient takes approximately one to two minutes. The heart of the consultation should be about what is wrong with the individual.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended until half-past Two o'clock.

Fair Trade

2.30 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a great honour to be given this opportunity so early in the new Parliament to address the key issue of international social and economic justice, particularly at such an opportune moment. As we approach the G8 summit, World Trade Organisation talks and a six-month European Union presidency, it seems that the stars are aligned in such a way that this could be an historic moment for not only the Government and Parliament, but how we lead the world on this agenda.

I intend to address how we should be tackling what I see as a tyranny of oppression that affects so much of the developing world. It is not a tyranny that any dictator has imposed, but a tyranny of oppression that we can see symbolised by poverty, disease and malnutrition and a lack of access to water and basic sanitation, health care and education. It is a tyranny of oppression that is fixed by a set of global circumstances that it is within our power as international actors to do much to alleviate.

Today in the United Kingdom, the moment is right. We have a recently re-elected Government who are committed fully to international development, and we also have cross-party support for tackling global poverty. Crucially, the UK will also shortly assume the presidencies of both the EU and G8 in the run-up to the vital WTO talks in Hong Kong. For a brief moment, it seems that everything is lined up in the right direction.

Perhaps most significantly, the British and international publics are pressing for action, most visibly through campaigns such as the momentous Make Poverty History campaign but also through others such as the excellent Trade Justice Movement, which has lobbied us so effectively in Parliament over a number years. Several representatives of the Make Poverty History campaign have informed me that they have been overwhelmed by the public's enthusiasm for an ambitious agenda. Indeed, the campaign's ubiquitous white wristbands—even though they have become a focal point for the powerful negative externalities of global trade such as work force exploitation—are symbolic of perhaps the greatest groundswell of opinion in support of global action since Band Aid 20 years ago.

Make Poverty History is a unique campaign, because it is not asking us to pledge money per se; instead, its primary goal is structural. It asks us to challenge how we view the developing world and our relationship with it. Essentially, Make Poverty History is asking us to make a long-term political pledge, with each wristband symbolising a commitment on the part of its wearer to pressurising those in power to tackle the global inequalities that condemn billions in the developing world to grinding poverty. I firmly believe that in Britain today we have an unprecedented opportunity to respond positively and energetically to that popular pressure.

The political developments to date, with the agenda led by the Government and the popular pressure to reform, are considerable, and we have great cause to feel optimistic. Ultimately, however, our achievements to date, our ambitions on debt relief and aid, and our hopes of achieving the millennium development goals

will be hugely diminished if we cannot combine that with similar concurrent progress on trade. Of the three main concerns of the Make Poverty History campaign—aid, debt relief and trade—it is the last that I wish to discuss today. That is because I believe that, although we can never afford to be complacent, we are already pushing the agenda on debt relief and aid, and others will follow if we keep our nose to the grindstone.

The momentous efforts of our Prime Minister, who was much criticised for spending time on international diplomacy, are to be applauded. When his personal commitment and efforts bring President Bush to the table, jointly proposing to write off the debt of 32 countries if coupled with economic reform and the measures to tackle corruption, this will be a milestone in transatlantic co-operation and bode well for the G8 summit. As the White House spokesman Scott McLellan said only a few days ago, debt relief was

"one area where we have [illegible]ared goal".

On the surface, the aid package is much less hopeful, and I trust that the Prime Minister and all his Ministers will make every effort to persuade the President to go further and faster. Indeed, I note that some are already speculating that that will happen. I would welcome the Minister's reassurance that diplomatic pressure will continue behind the scenes up to G8 and beyond, because he knows that if the US were to match the 0.7 per cent. of national income recommended by the United Nations for international aid, the US would not only get the thanks of the global community but it would help us reach the target of an extra £14 billion being pledged before G8, and I would be first to send a note of congratulations to the White House.

It is on international trade justice that we face our stiffest challenge, and our efforts in that arena will ultimately define the limits of our success in the crucial months ahead. The US Trade Secretary has set his face against calls for an immediate cessation of cotton and sugar subsidies, as demanded in the Commission for Africa's report, even though the World Trade Organisation has ruled that US cotton subsidies are in breach of trade rules. Even on our own doorstep, the indefensible horror that is the common agricultural policy gives the lie to those who constantly point an accusing finger at the US alone. CAP was described by the Commission for Africa as the world's most protectionist trade regime. To make it worse, abuses of trade rules by both the US and the EU have consequences that are so transparent and obvious that no sane person would not cry out for immediate reform.

Whenever we look back at the millions of people harmed by smoking, we try to identify the point in time when the manufacturers unarguably knew what their product was doing. We did the same with health claims in the UK coal industry in order to determine liability for the billions of pounds now being paid out because someone knew that damage was being done to miners' health.

It is now clear—it has been clear for a while—what damage is being done to developing and impoverished nations and those at the receiving end of the protectionist policies of the US and the EU. We are complicit unless we move to change those abhorrent rules of trade that dump subsidised products on developing nations and undercut their indigenous agriculture and industry. It is only through fair trading arrangements that development can be sustainable in the long term. Although aid and debt relief are vital—they grant developing nations a breathing space—without equal terms of trade, such countries can never hope to grow and prosper.

Handouts and bail outs provide little in the way of incentive to invest in the construction of a vibrant industrial base, a flourishing agricultural sector or a robust trading infrastructure. Nor can they ever hope to provide the sort of stable, consistent funding upon which adequate vital public services can be financed. At best, they keep developing nations in a state of perpetual hope—and, at worst, in permanent despair.

From a hard-nosed western perspective, we would clearly benefit from fairer trading arrangements with the developing world. Apart from the overwhelming moral motivations, there are powerful economic and political imperatives for fair trade. For example, CAP export subsidies sting the British public twice over. According to Oxfam, not only does the policy cost UK taxpayers £3.9 billion a year, but, as consumers, the average family of four pays £800 extra more every 12 months than it would in the absence of CAP.

Moreover, aid and debt relief do not represent long-term value for money for the taxpayer. That is especially so if the recipients of the money are simultaneously denied the opportunity to repay the donors by generating their own wealth through productivity and trade.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the case that he makes. Although I accept what he says about import barriers and especially export subsidies, does he not accept that the most recent and significant reform of the common agricultural policy has, from the beginning of this year, largely removed production subsidies from agriculture throughout the EU, and that although the process is transitional, at least it is now actually beginning?

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful intervention. We are undoubtedly moving in the right direction, and the speed at which we do so is important. I agree that progress is being made, and that it is being made because of international pressure, applied not least by this Government. We need to continue to make progress, and to do so faster, because the implications of not doing so are staring us in the face at this very moment.

I am very pleased that the UK Government have recognised the central role of trade in development, and that we have built considerable momentum in that direction to date. Of course, if we are to achieve the millennium development goals, secure the conditions for a successful pro-poor outcome to the Doha round, and ultimately lay the foundations for a fairer global trading system, no one can deny that we, the Minister and his colleagues face a challenge of immense proportions. However, as the non-governmental and campaigning organisations acknowledge, we are taking important steps in that direction. Indeed, the Government have already shown their clear desire to play a leading role in tackling global trade injustice.

Perhaps the most significant recent development has been the Government's recent acceptance that the Commission for Africa's March 2005 report should

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form the basis of UK policy. That is hugely welcome. It is particularly encouraging when we consider that powerful document's central argument on trade: that developing nations should be able to manage their own trade policies and paths to development rather than having them dictated by wealthy states. Leaders of developing countries have frequently reiterated that sentiment to those who are willing to listen. The President of Tanzania expressed that view succinctly when he implored developing states to recognise that

"Development cannot be imposed. It can only be facilitated. It requires ownership, participation and empowerment, not harangues and dictates".

As the Commission for Africa's report rightly stresses, it is simply inappropriate to dictate policy to fellow sovereign nations. Isolated from key decisions over their own future and often sensing little immediate progress, Governments and citizens of poor countries are also likely to become progressively less enthusiastic about taking the painful measures that developed nations have declared necessary for their reform and recovery. More often than not, the result is stagnation, opposition and even resentment both domestically and internationally. By contrast, the results can be considerable when poor nations are provided with the opportunity to manage their own economic development.

The UK Government have acknowledged the force of that argument. In its July 2000 White Paper, "Making Globalisation a Force for Good", the Department of Trade and Industry underlined the importance of affording developing states the autonomy to determine their own development priorities. It clearly stated that

"developing countries need the space to design and sequence trade reform packages in a way that is appropriate for their particular circumstances, and then integrate them into their own development and poverty reduction strategies."

The enthusiasm of the Minister, of Cabinet Ministers, and of the Prime Minister for pushing that message in the coming months is essential, because it is only by building a multilateral consensus on the importance of enhancing the room that developing states have to manoeuvre on trade issues that we can hope to secure significant and lasting change. We must therefore have those goals in mind when we assume the presidencies of the EU and the G8. Europe will undoubtedly be our busiest arena in this respect. The fact that the UK presidency of the EU will inevitably be dominated by the consequences of the rejection of the European constitution will certainly make it even busier, but I see no reason why that should necessarily distract us from our focus on eradicating global poverty.

After all, if Europe is indeed looking for a new direction, a new purpose and a sense of collective mission, we will be extremely well placed to shape that new identity positively. To that end, we must be sure to highlight two ever-present challenges on the international fair trade "to do" list—subsidies and market access. As the Minister knows, the economic partnership agreements will provide a prime opportunity to raise the issue of market access.

With the possibility of free access to the European market, EPAs could hold great promise for the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries involved. According to the Trade Justice Movement, however, that promise will be negated if the EU negotiates EPAs in a way that includes reciprocal trade liberalisation and new rules regarding the Singapore issues, namely competition, investment and public procurement. The path that the EU takes could have crucial implications for poverty reduction and for development. A 2003 impact assessment by PricewaterhouseCoopers postulated that a bad EPA had the potential to destroy west Africa's manufacturing sector, so we must move forward with consideration. The pace and structure of reform must be in the interests of the developing nations, not just the western, leading developed nations.

Alternatively, the EU could back a fair EPA, or an alternative viable agreement that does not demand full and immediate liberalisation. The European Commission could also encourage its developed world partners at the WTO towards a firm agreement on special and differential treatment that empowers developing states to set tariff levels according to their specific industrial and agricultural requirements. If the EU can be coaxed, cajoled, bullied or bested down the latter route, it will represent a significant boost to the long-term development potential of many least-developed countries, and it will help to build an invaluable developed-world consensus on the benefits of empowering poor nations to choose how, when and what to liberalise. Such an outcome would be a historic coup for the UK presidency.

Halting unfettered, pure, laissez-faire liberalisation will not make developing nations any freer to manage their economies if their vital agricultural sector is simultaneously undermined by developed-world export subsidies and dumping. That point has been highlighted by the case of the EU sugar regime. Conspicuously absent from the "Everything but Arms" agreements until 2009, the price of sugar in the EU, according to the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development, has been maintained at three times the world market level by tariffs of up to 140 per cent. It is perhaps unsurprising that the WTO recently ruled that the sugar subsidies are illegal, as it did with similarly unjust American subsidies of cotton. It is vital that we interpret the ruling in a way that enhances development opportunities by eliminating those subsidies and increasing the import quotas from less developed countries.

More generally, the UK must endeavour to ensure that a core priority of its EU presidency is the rapid phase-out of agricultural subsidies, and it must ideally aim for the Commission for Africa's goal of 2010, even though it is ambitious. Moreover, as is appreciated, progress on agricultural subsidies is central to the ultimate success of the Doha round, and we must be ceaseless in our insistence that the EU agrees a date at the WTO ministerial talks in Hong Kong in December for the total phase-out of subsidies.

In addition to the EU presidency, the G8 presidency and the Gleneagles summit give clear opportunities for the UK to press a new model of global trade on its developed-world partners. Although there are institutional limitations on the G8 in terms of its ability to influence the WTO, the UK can still reasonably hope to build momentum for change if it uses that platform to reiterate consistently a pro-development line. After all, those Heads of State assembling in Perthshire in July

ultimately control the bulk of global trade and unofficially dominate the major international financial institutions.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I endorse the thrust of what the hon. Gentleman says, but I hope that he will not ignore or play down the significance of tariff barriers. Is he aware that in 2003, Sri Lanka, for example, paid no less than $244 million to the United States in duties and $77 million to the European Union, and that those figures were notable by comparison with Indonesia, which paid respectively $426 million and $180 million? Does he agree that those countries recovering from the tragedies that have afflicted them simply cannot afford to dispense with $1 billion a year by pumping that money into the treasuries of already very much richer nations?

Huw Irranca-Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a clear point about why there cannot be a blanket, universal approach. Things must be done on a nation-by-nation, case-by-case basis because of the different situations in the developing nations. The historical development of subsidies, tariffs and protectionist measures in one nation is different from another. He makes a good point.

I will return to the subject of trade talks—looking six or seven months ahead. As with the presidency of the EU, it is imperative that we approach the G8 summit with a clear set of goals. In terms of trade, foremost among those must be to bring significant pressure to bear on the issue of enforced liberalisation through International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans and debt relief packages. The recent review of conditionality by the Department for International Development set a positive tone in that respect and was most welcome. It recognised the need to place development at the heart of the constructive relationship between donor and recipient. The concept of partnerships for poverty reduction is groundbreaking in its recognition that dialogue rather than dictation should characterise the interaction between poor and rich states. Such a message must be fundamentally promoted in discussions with our G8 colleagues.

If we are seriously to commit to enhancing the developmental autonomy of poor states, another key issue will be aid for trade. As the Commission for Africa report points out, developing nations struggle to adjust to changes in trading patterns and to capitalise on fairer trading conditions because of their weak capacity to trade. Targeting aid specifically at improving trading infrastructure, such as by securing efficient transport links, reliable energy suppliers or enhanced technical expertise, is therefore vital for assisting development. The costs are unsurprisingly high. Recent World Bank research estimated that an additional $10 billion to $20 billion a year will be needed to ensure adequate, basic trading infrastructure investment in the developing world. The international finance facility proposed by the Treasury, which is facing some stormy waters overseas, would go a long way towards meeting those costs, as part of our much wider efforts to achieve the millennium development goals.

Of course, there are many other issues that we could and should push our developed world partners to take urgent action on. The requirement that will determine success in all those areas is, above all, the need to change attitudes. We can only ever hope to nudge Governments gradually and incrementally towards a fairer trading system if, fundamentally, they see the real need and appreciate the benefits. If Governments truly believe that trade justice is critical and if they are willing to prioritise it and to think about security as a global concept, the chances of developing states gaining greater freedom to determine their own path to prosperity will surely be enhanced. That is why the popular campaigns running at the moment are so important.

There will, of course, be vested interests in any state that stands to lose out from a fundamental change to the global trading system. Given the potential for that opposition, the timing will never be perfect for any Government to approve such changes. When asked to carry out such restructuring by another Government, it is always easy to negotiate, bargain and agree small concessions dressed up in generous oratory. If Governments are asked to make such changes by a significant proportion of their electorate and with the support of their own cross-party politicians, however, it becomes much easier to go ahead and more risky to procrastinate or fudge. With a transnational mass movement now agitating for change and a Government committed to taking action on global poverty, we have genuine cause to hope that this could be the year when inertia is no longer the easy answer to uncomfortable questions.

I do not underestimate the challenge that faces the Minister and his colleagues in the months ahead. At times, it will probably seem to him that all he hears are voices in the press and the non-governmental organisations, and politicians and colleagues, berating the Government for failing to achieve every milestone that I know that he so much desires to reach. At the outset of a very tricky and turbulent period, I say to him that he has our best wishes, our support and our hopes. When any hurdle is failed, he will hear us shouting from the sidelines to get up again and take another run. That may sound critical, but it is actually encouragement. When each hurdle is cleared, he will hear the cheers and he will deserve them. This debate is part of the clamour for action. Accept the noise for what it is: a growing international mood that we cannot turn our backs on our neighbours any longer.

We want to succeed. Change the rules so that the voice of the developing nations is heard more loudly from the sidelines. Change the rules so that the developing nations are actually playing on the same pitch, on a level playing field. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue and I urge the Government not to blink when confronted with vested interests. "At our best when at our boldest"—never has a truer word been spoken.

2.56 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate very sincerely the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on his choice of subject at an opportune time: the lead-up to the summit. It is very appropriate that he introduced the subject and did so in an effective way, emphasising the moral dimension behind trade policy that is often overlooked. I agreed with a large part of what he had to say. Indeed, I would

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

subscribe to some of his more colourful rhetoric about the indefensible horrors of the common agricultural policy, as well as his more general arguments.

I shall explain why I am speaking in an unfamiliar Back-Bench role. It is partly because I share the Chancellor's view—and that of the leader of the Conservative party expressed today—that we cannot treat trade policy as if it were in a separate box. It is part of the broader approach to global development, the international economy and the future of developing countries. There is no point trying to deal with aid and debt relief in one compartment while ignoring the trade dimension: they are part of an interrelated whole. Those of us who are interested in better economic policy, particularly helping growth in developing countries, have to attend to trade policy issues.

On a purely personal level, I spent a substantial part of my professional life dealing with development matters in developing countries, particularly trade policy. I argued for many years for a trade liberalising agenda, but things are still—alas—very much the same as they were 20 or 30 years ago. Many of the trade barriers that we argued about vehemently in the 1970s are unfortunately still there, but none the less it is important to restate the arguments.

I take a slightly different tack from the hon. Member for Ogmore; I want to reinforce what he says, but I have a slightly different point to make. Very often we use vocabulary about trade justice and fairness that is confusing. The word "fairness" in trade policy is used in several quite different, and sometimes rather unhelpful, ways. I use the term "fair trade" in the sense of free and fair trade in broadly the same way as the hon. Gentleman. In a sense, it means free trade with a purpose: opening up markets, getting rid of distorting subsidies and achieving the aim of helping poor people in poor countries.

Unfortunately, "fair trade" is often used by different people in different ways. Certainly, in the days when I was doing battle with the European textile lobby—a body called Comitextil— it would try to justify the introduction of quotas by using the term "fair trade policy". Very often, one finds American protectionist lobbies say that they are demanding fair trade, giving the term a completely different and opposite meaning.

The term is also used in a third way, which the hon. Gentleman used, to defend non-reciprocity in trade. There are arguments about reciprocity and I shall come to them in a moment, but the meaning is different and it does not just concern open markets. In some contexts, it defends protection. There is also the issue of preferences. "Fair trade" is often used as a way of justifying preferences for some developing countries over others, and defending quotas for supposedly more worthy developing countries. This is an issue in relation to textiles, sugar, bananas and so on. We need to deal with that.

Lastly, "fair trade" is used in a context that we often encounter in supermarkets, where fair trade products are advocated because they are produced with better social standards or in some other way. That may be desirable but, again, the meaning is completely different. The words "fairness" and "justice" are used in many ways and I want to be a little more precise about what exactly we are talking about.

Sometimes the arguments are muddled unhelpfully and a good example of that is textiles. There has been a retrograde move in international trade policy in the past few weeks. Regrettably, the Trade Commissioner in Brussels, Mr. Mandelson, who had made some effective interventions, seems to have gone backwards and accepted demands from the French Government that textile quotas should be strengthened or reintroduced, particularly for China. It is clear that those demands have come from producer interest groups in western Europe, but quotas have been justified on the grounds that we must protect other developing countries from China. That is a separate argument, but it is being used and intermingled dishonestly. We are used to that in the sugar agreement, which is a complex problem that has been with us for three decades at least. There is an unholy alliance between sugar beet producers and high-cost producers in the Caribbean and elsewhere to protect an inefficient regime that does great harm to developing country exporters. Different aspects of fairness are used in different ways and sometimes unhelpfully.

I turn to two tricky issues of trade policy, and there is a right answer to neither. The first is reciprocity, upon which the hon. Member for Ogmore touched. Should developing countries concede liberalisation when negotiating trade agreements and, if so, in what circumstances? During the election and earlier, we all received deputations from trade justice groups, Churches and so on. I agreed with 95 per cent. of their arguments, but they wanted me to say that opening up the markets of poor countries is a bad thing and that we must fight against that. That may be so, but many poor countries such as India have suffered great damage from excessively protective trade policies, and I am not sure that I want to subscribe to them.

We must consider more critically the argument for reciprocity. Under existing rules, which were developed under the general agreement on tariffs and trade and have been carried forward by the World Trade Organisation, developing countries can seek special and differential treatment of trade in goods. Different negotiating principles are involved in services but an offer principle applies and countries do not have to offer concessions if they do not want to. Poor developing countries, particularly in Africa, that do not want to participate do not have to do so.

The World Trade Organisation specifically protects developing countries from undue pressure to open up their markets if they choose not to do so. Many of the lobbyists on trade justice seem not to appreciate how the system operates and mix it up with a separate matter: how the European Union, in its bilateral relationships, and sometimes the World Bank, in its aid packages, use trade liberalisation as a condition.

The simple answer is that developing countries should not be forced to adopt policies that they feel passionately are against their interests. There should be no coercion, but in many cases it will be in the interests of developing countries to pursue more liberal policies. Throughout south-east Asia, Thailand, Malaysia, India

and China have radically reduced their import quota and tariff regimes to their own betterment. That should not be imposed, but it is often in their interests.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman made an interesting point about reciprocity and referred to China and the far east—the Asian tiger economies. Does he agree that they had a period of protectionism to build up their domestic industries before liberalising their tariffs and allowing themselves to be open to competition from elsewhere? That was one of the keys to their success.

Dr. Cable: Some did and some did not. History is varied, but there is a model and Korea is perhaps the best example of a country that developed behind severe barriers to trade and foreign investment, grew spectacularly rapidly and, in recent years, opened up both to trade liberalisation and democracy. It has carried that off effectively. However, other countries—for example, Hong Kong and Singapore—never had trade restrictions. From the outset, Taiwan had a much more liberal economic system. There were big differences among the Asian countries.

At the moment, the problem area is Africa. Is it right that African countries should be asked or recommended to break down trade barriers? The answers are complex. One of the first jobs I ever had, as a young economist, was working in African government in Kenya. I was involved in the negotiation of industrial projects—concerning pulp and paper factories and textile factories—that depended for their viability on quotas and tariffs. For decades, those institutions have drained wealth from African countries in a damaging way. It would have been better for the countries concerned if they had pursued a more liberal trade policy. As it is Africa, we are not supposed to say that, but trade liberalisation might well have helped, rather than hindered, those countries in their development.

I accept the point that the hon. Member for Ogmore made that it is a different story in agriculture. When large numbers of peasant farmers are subject to the fluctuations of world commodity markets, a different set of arguments kicks in. However, we should not automatically buy the argument that it is in the interests of developing countries to pursue closed economies for a significant period of their development.

John Bercow: As usual, the hon. Gentleman is making an immensely challenging and thoughtful speech. Does he not agree that, despite the complexities of the issues and the need for a case-by-case approach, there are at least two guiding principles that are relevant to the duties of developing countries in trade policy? First, developing countries certainly should not be required to open their markets to subsidised exports by countries that are already much richer than they are. Secondly, if developing countries are to maintain some policy space to continue their own tariff or subsidy regimes, retention of those regimes should be time limited. There can be no benefit to developing countries permanently seeking to sustain themselves using a sort of dependency culture.

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Dr. Cable: Those are both good points and I agree with them. The first is especially useful. As I understand it under trade laws, if one is faced with competing inputs that are subsidised, it is possible to introduce what are called countervailing duties. It is recognised that it should not be allowed to dump subsidised products on other countries, so the principle is accepted. If developing countries are being coerced into importing subsidised food or other products, that is clearly wrong and those countries should be protected from it. I completely accept that point.

The point about time limiting relates to my second point, which is about the issue of preference. One of the complications that has grown up in the trade system is often unhelpful. It is that different groups of countries are protected against other developing countries. I have great suspicion about the layer of preferences that have been introduced by the European Union playing off one developing country against another. That is now happening in sensitive areas.

One of the problems in textiles, which I will come back to, is that, after decades of arguing, the rich countries have been persuaded to get rid of—eventually—the quotas that were first introduced with the Lancashire long-term textile agreement in the mid-1960s and that were consolidated in the multi-fibre arrangement of the 1970s. After three decades, they were at last persuaded to get rid of those quotas. Now, because of competition from China, the argument is resurfacing that the decision was premature and we need to reintroduce the quotas, not just to protect our industries but to help poor little places such as Lesotho and Swaziland that have cut out factories that try to exploit little loopholes in the quota regime. Although I am immensely sympathetic to Lesotho, Swaziland and the rest of those countries, which include, on a much bigger scale, Bangladesh, there is great danger of that argument being seriously abused to perpetuate a regime that is massively inefficient and causes great cost to developing countries and our own consumers. I hope that we will not go down that road.

My next point will reinforce what the hon. Member for Ogmore has been saying. It is right that problems of market access and production subsidies are the main enemies and the things that must be fought. We have to argue for access to the markets of rich countries, and for production subsidies to be got rid of, particularly in sectors such as cotton. Such subsidies are shameful and inexcusable. Those should be the priorities.

My final, simple point is that everything must take place within a framework of rules. Poor countries and small countries have more to lose from anarchy than big rich countries, such as the United States or China. That is why the World Trade Organisation is so important. One of the more dispiriting aspects of the entire debate on trade policy and fair trade is that many people who share my emotional support for developing countries and their aspirations have become hostile to multilateralism and are attacking the WTO. Any organisation has its weaknesses, but to destroy the rule of law in trade would be deeply damaging and retrograde. The debate must be located in that context.

3.11 pm

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the choice of debate from my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies). It is timely

[Ann McKechin]

and appropriate given the current major debate on the best way for the international community to address world poverty and particularly poverty in Africa. As has been commented, this year will be a key period in political history if we are to achieve meaningful change.

Our thoughts are focused on the G8 summit in Gleneagles in a few weeks' time. I am encouraged that there are real signs of progress on the issues relating to aid and debt, but we need the world leaders at that summit also to make progress on the third main issue: world trade. As we can tell from today's debate, that is possibly the most difficult and contentious of those three major topics. It involves not only the simple movement of what is still a tiny fraction of our wealth to poorer nations, but substantial change in the operation of our economies and a phasing out of the huge range of subsidies and tariff rates that currently protect a sizeable amount of our own production. We need our political leaders to show courage and determined commitment to achieve change, and to do so urgently, before the opportunities fade away from us.

Our last substantive debate on world trade took place about 18 months ago, when we had the opportunity to discuss the excellent report prepared by the International Development Committee, following on from the Cancun ministerial summit. I attended that summit as part of the parallel parliamentary conference, so I had the opportunity to witness at first hand the frustration of many nations that their priorities on development issues were squeezed out by an overloaded agenda that eventually toppled over, with no real progress in any of the major areas. At that time, there seemed little sign that any substantial agreement would be reached, and there was a danger that major players, such as the USA, would slip back into relying on bilateral trade agreements and establishing free trade areas. However, there are now signs that most nations see the benefit of reaching a comprehensive multilateral trade agreement and, particularly in the west, there is increasing public pressure on leaders to consider the needs of the world's poorest in a development-focused round.

The Commission for Africa report highlights the fact that unless Africa increases its diminishing share of world trade, it will fail to achieve sustainable growth and poverty reduction. However much aid we put into the continent, if we do not increase its share of world trade, we will never achieve the goals. As the report points out, in stark contrast to what has happened in the emerging economies in India, China and Brazil, the last 30 years have seen stagnation in Africa, with the composition of its exports essentially remaining unchanged.

The commission identifies the two main causes of the collapse in Africa's share of world trade. The first is its low capacity to produce and trade, which has been consistently hindered by protectionist policies such as those in the European Union, as my hon. Friend identified. The commission does not hold back in condemning current trading systems. It states that

"barriers and subsidies are absolutely unacceptable; they are politically antiquated, economically illiterate, environmentally destructive, and ethically undesirable. They must go."

Secondly, the commission identifies the advance of other nations such as China and India as having made it more difficult for Africa to break into world markets at this time, as competitors have established strong advantages on the world market. Any new trade agreement that we consider this year must take into account both those issues, and it must ensure that there is a proper sequencing of the reforms and that special and differential treatment obligations are an integral part of any final deal.

It is important that, when we reach agreement, a distinction should be made between the needs of middle-income and often larger nations, and those of the poorest nations, which include all those of sub-Saharan Africa. For a time at least, it will be vital to provide the poorest nations with some form of protectionism, so that they do not simply swap one form of export dumping from the USA and the European Union for a huge tide of exports from emerging economies, with which they cannot, at this stage, be reasonably expected to compete on anything like equal terms. We need to meet that challenge this year.

Since the Cancun summit, the EU has agreed to drop three of the most contentious Singapore issues: competition, investment and transparency in public procurement. The continued strength of the G20 group, which encompasses nations such as China, India and Brazil, shows that middle-income nations—we should recall that they comprise more than 50 per cent. of the world's population—are willing to show their weight on the world scene.

The recent cases brought by Brazil at the WTO tribunal against the EU and the USA on subsidies for cotton and sugar show that the G20 has a new and sophisticated political strategy, to which the richer nations will need to adapt quickly. That was completely underestimated at the Cancun ministerial summit, but now there is a growing realisation that the EU and the USA need to engage in the talks, out of not only altruism, but a recognition that they need to co-operate with emerging world economies if they are to protect their own trade positions in turn.

John Bercow: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important that there should be a synchronisation of reform and relief in relation to sugar, for example? Does she accept that there is a real concern that if EEC reform takes effect in 2006, relief provision for developing countries suffering from that reform will take effect only between 2007 and 2013? There is an inequity that needs to be addressed.

Ann McKechin: Yes, I agree. The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The EU has a duty to ensure that a proper agreement is made multilaterally and that a tribunal ruling on which it has to make an immediate decision is not made against it. Unfortunately, in such a case, developing countries' needs would probably end up being ignored. Increasingly, the EU and the USA are realising that nations from middle-income countries are now prepared to take cases against them to the WTO and that they have to respond to that challenge, while taking into account, as the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, the needs of the poorest nations.

The agreement reached at the WTO last July involved concessions to eliminate, in principle, all agricultural export subsidies in the richer nations and substantially

reduce trade-distorting farm supports, including specific action on cotton. That shows a new trend in the current trade talks. Crucially, the EU and the USA came to an agreement, even though each side had a tendency in the past to blame the other when pressurised on its own agricultural support. They agreed that a €3 billion reduction in EU export subsidies will be accompanied by a matching reduction in the USA's trade-distorting export credits and food aid.

That is a good sign, but the crucial test is whether a timetable for those changes can be agreed. They also have to agree about a large number of other outstanding issues concerning industrial products and services.

Prior to the ministerial meeting in Paris at the beginning of last month, the WTO director general, Dr. Supachai Panitchpakdi, indicated that a high level of convergence was still needed in five areas if there was to be a breakthrough at the Hong Kong summit in December, moving to a final agreement during 2006. He mentioned agreements on agriculture and on non-agricultural goods, the need for a critical mass in service officers under the general agreement on trade in services, on which there has been little progress since Cancun, as well as significant progress on rules and trade facilitation, and a proper reflection on the development agenda.

The Paris meeting last month concentrated on agriculture, and there was a welcome breakthrough on something that is so technical that I had a bit of trouble understanding what it is. Apparently, it is an agreement to calculate tariffs on a percentage basis of the goods value. I understand that that has held up negotiations for many months. All sides recognise that much more needs to be done before the next ministerial summit, which is due to take place in July. That is why the G8 summit, which will take place prior to that meeting, offers an additional opportunity for reaching further agreement on producing a clear timetable for tariff reductions. It is a good sign that the new US trade negotiator, Rob Portman, has declared that an agreement can boost jobs and prosperity, and can help lift millions of people out of poverty, if we do the right thing. I hope that our Government will continue to strive for further major concessions at the G8 summit, and will hold the USA in particular to its statements on supporting a multilateral deal.

Time is beginning to run short, particularly for the USA, in reaching that final agreement. The second term of the Bush presidency has witnessed an increasingly stormy relationship between the Senate and the President, and it is clear that there are strong protectionist tendencies in both the Senate and the Congress. In 2007, the President's fast-tracking negotiating authority will run out, and there is little prospect of it being renewed. Accordingly, it is vital that we have a skeleton agreement by the time of the December conference, and I hope that the prospect of success in getting that can be improved in the next few months.

I also support the statements of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore about the recent negotiations on the EU economic partnership agreements with the African, Caribbean and Pacific nations, and I especially support our Government's position on those negotiations. I share the concern of many that there seems to be an attempt to reintroduce the Singapore issues through the back door without equal rights to negotiate on EU regulations and subsidies, when it was patently obvious from Cancun that there is no call for this from developing nations. That is the group of countries that needs the highest level of concessions in their favour. I agree with the Government's approach: developing nations must be able to choose the pace, sequencing and product coverage of economic partnership agreements, and remaining EU tariffs should be eliminated, without conditions on the poorest nations. I hope that the Minister can give an assurance today that there will be no change in the United Kingdom's position on that.

I congratulate the Fairtrade Foundation on its continued success in the United Kingdom, in terms of both its market share, which increases by significant amounts every year, and its important advocacy work in trade issues and the need to secure trade justice for the world's poorest. I have been fortunate in being involved over the past few months in the arrangements to try to achieve fair trade city status for Glasgow; it would then have the accolade of being the biggest retail centre in the UK to have attained that status. I also welcome the announcement last week of the Scottish Executive First Minister, Jack McConnell, who wants to follow on from the excellent example set by the home nation of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore by achieving fair trade nation status for Scotland.

Many thousands of our constituents are greatly concerned about trade justice, and I know that they, along with Members present, hope that 2005 is the year in which we achieve the real breakthrough, by making world trade much fairer and freeing millions of people from poverty.

3.24 pm

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): I echo the final point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow, North (Ann McKechin): all who examine the opportunities to make poverty history recognise that 2005 is a pivotal year. If we fail this year, there will be a less rosy picture of the future for all the non-governmental organisations and campaigners who have campaigned for many years. They are hoping—with the G8 summit, the UN millennium council in September, the WTO talks later this year and the opportunity for the UK Government to take an important lead as a result of their presidency of the EU and of the G8—that this is the year of major change.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on securing the debate, on doing so in such a timely fashion and on making such a strong case, which I endorse. I am well aware that as a new boy to these debates I could easily fall into the trap, as perhaps others have, of believing that coming new and fresh to them enables one instantaneously to find an inspired policy solution that has strangely bypassed armies of policy thinkers and academics over the past few decades. I do not hold that view and I reassure Members that I do not start from the position of thinking that I will inject the debate with that flash of inspiration, although I would like to think that one day I might. This is a question of probing the issue so that we can move it forward and of an Opposition party encouraging the Government.

The debate is largely consensual, which is good because we can concentrate on the positive things, but it could become weak and flabby and lose the sharpness of

[Andrew George]

the challenging debates that the Chamber often experiences. The background is not just the opportunities that I mentioned, but the Live 8 rock event and the gathering of people concerned about achieving a positive outcome from the G8 summit in July. That has helped to raise the issue's profile. Those who have campaigned for years are aware that away from the glamour of the rock concerts, the hard graft on the ground in developing countries still needs to go on.

The fundamental principles of wanting to establish trade justice for developing countries is based on our understanding of a policy of enlightened self-interest: we have an interest but we must be enlightened to the extent that we are aware of the impact of our policies on those countries when we implement things. Let us consider the development of the policies, particularly by the west, over the past 10 or more years. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) has much more front-line experience in that regard than me. There is much emphasis on the west's having involved itself in pursuing the self-interest part of the policy, but the enlightenment bit does not appear to have kicked in a great deal. I hope that that element of "enlightened self-interest" is kick-started in 2005.

Although I welcome what I hope is not momentary compassion from those who will attend rock concerts in a few weeks' time, the way that the debate is developing suggests that there is a certain schizophrenia among the public in this country and in the west in general. Sometimes difficult decisions have to be taken and people start saying, "We want to cut hospital waiting times", "Deal with the potholes in our roads" or, "Improve the rail service"; often the same people who turn up at the rock concerts or who wear the campaign wristbands will question why so much money is spent on debt relief and aid in other countries for people we do not know when we still have not got things sorted out in this country. We must bear that theme in mind. Political pressures will inevitably fall on us politicians, and we will have to face difficult decisions about the development of, and poverty in, less-developed countries when those topics are not in the media or the subject of public attention. However, we must sustain momentum.

When people in the west realise that the implementation of trade justice policies might mean that some parts of their country's economy become less profitable as the cold winds of global trade make some companies more marginal, and when they realise that improvements in labour standards in other countries might mean that we cannot buy our trainers, footballs and fashion accessories as cheaply, people may question why we have gone down that route. We must keep the public on board when pursuing those policies and we must recognise that there will be implications for our lifestyles and standards of living.

The hon. Member for Ogmore rightly emphasised the tyranny of oppression on the world's poor and the golden opportunity that we have this year. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham, who has a great deal of experience on this subject, while supporting the contribution made by the hon. Gentleman, pointed out that there may be more disagreement behind the scenes and behind the language used than there appears at first sight—for example, about the definition of the word "fair". Everything looks fair from someone's perspective if it benefits them but it is never fair for others on the receiving end of policies that do not benefit them. The language used in the debate masks more disagreement on the world stage than our debates here give the impression of.

My hon. Friend also rightly argued against the one-size-fits-all policy for future trade relations and emphasised the need to move as rapidly as possible away from export subsidies and trade barriers, which are unjustifiable across a large number of economies and commodities.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, North discussed the important role that the United States plays, and, in that context, we had the announcement of the outcome of the Prime Minister's recent visit to the US President. Although there were agreeable words at the press conference last night, I have significant concerns that the fact that the United States spends about $100 billion a year in pursuit of its policy in Iraq compared with $4 billion in Africa indicates its priorities. If we are to make a significant difference to the way in which the G8 and other countries pursue policies, it will be essential to bring the United States further on board.

I have a number of questions for the Minister, as I am sure he will be delighted to know. The first follows up a question I raised during departmental questions. I asked the Secretary of State about economic partnership agreements, which have been mentioned by others, and especially by the hon. Member for Ogmore. I asked for reassurance that ACP countries would be given a genuine choice between signing up to EPAs and pro-development alternatives. The Secretary of State answered:

> "Yes, I agree with him. In the end, it is for ACP countries to decide whether they wish to sign up to economic partnership agreements. They can have confidence about the choice that they will face if they see that there are alternatives if they do not like the deal on the table. From my conversations with Trade Ministers in developing countries, I know that they are clear that all is to play for on these agreements. They know what they want and I am sure that they will use their bargaining power to achieve it."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2005; Vol.434, c. 691.]

That was said in the context of a letter of 11 April sent to the UK Government, in which the European Commission said that a statement made by the UK Government on 21 March

> "represents a major and unwelcome shift in the UK position as it focuses exclusively on the potential risks of EPAs".

The letter goes on to list a number of concerns about the way in which the UK's interpretation of EPAs, and of giving ACP countries a genuine choice, is not reflected in the views of other European countries or in the agreement by the Council of Ministers. The letter says:

> "Peter Mandelson is taking up our concerns and will press for a revised UK line, noting that their statement is contrary to the agreed EU position and harmful for our common objective of promoting development through trade."

I would be grateful if the Minister would let us know what progress has been made in those negotiations with Peter Mandelson. One assumes that the Government speak the same language as the Trade Commissioner, both literally and politically, and so I hope that the Government can make progress in ensuring that less-developed, ACP countries genuinely have a choice.

Also, I would welcome the Minister's clear interpretation of the revised line taken by the European Commission regarding EPAs and would like him to say whether the Government agree in principle that debt relief and aid should not be conditional on enforced trade policy. I am aware of the time, and of the fact that the Conservative spokesman and the Minister need to respond, so I shall end my remarks now.

3.38 pm

Mark Simmonds (Boston and Skegness) (Con): First, I should like to say how much I welcome this debate, which is timely. Secondly, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which he introduced it. It certainly was not a weak and flabby introduction; his remarks were strong and taut. I share many of his concerns, particularly those relating to the difficulties faced by developing countries as a result of agricultural subsidies, particularly those to do with dumping and western protectionism.

The Conservative party is supportive of the broad aims and objectives of the Make Poverty History campaign and the fair trade movement. They have certainly made a very important contribution to placing these issues right at the top of the political agenda. It is important to present a united British front to tackling the problems of Africa. We are supportive of the aims and objectives of the millennium development goals and we are committed to British development work overseas.

It is important to state that increasing aid budgets alone is not sufficient: Africa needs trade. To maximise the benefits of trade, international trade needs to be both freer and fairer. We understand that this cannot happen immediately, but we are committed to working towards genuinely free and fairer trade by supporting developing countries and less-developed economies through the transition period.

It is clear that international trade has lifted millions of people out of poverty, particularly in China and south-east Asia. Tragically, however, sub-Saharan Africa has not only been left behind, but its share of global trade has declined from 6 per cent. to just 2 per cent. in the past 20 years, despite significant levels of aid, particularly in recent years.

The economic benefits resulting from greater openness and freer trade are immense. Countries across the globe have benefited through trading, which has led to faster growth rates, cheaper imports, new technologies and stronger political ties, as well as increased security. Protection for developed countries at the expense of the developing world must come to an end. For every pound in aid that rich countries give to poor countries, the poor countries lose £2 through protectionist barriers. It is clear that opportunities for international development are being restricted by western protectionist policies. As the World Bank has said:

> "Current trade restrictions are the biggest impediment to economic advancement and poverty reduction in the developing world".

This is a critical time for the UK to play a role, particularly as it takes over the presidencies of the G8 and the European Union. The Government have a duty to use their influence to promote freer and fairer trade in the developing world. The EU and US should allow poor countries tariff-free access to our markets for raw materials and added-value products, thereby ending tariff escalation.

The global marketplace is a highly uneven playing field. The following example has been used before by other hon. Members. The ACP cotton producers have liberalised and removed their subsidies and could easily compete with US cotton producers, but the protectionist policies exercised by the US mean that the ACP farmers are not competing with US farmers, but with the US Treasury. That is not acceptable. Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin and Chad have all suffered. This is neither free trade, nor fair trade and it is preventing many African countries from successfully developing and exporting good quality, efficiently produced products.

We all accept that the international trading agreements are immensely complex. As the hon. Member for Twickenham rightly said, it is essential that we have an international framework. However, there is concern regarding a number of aspects of the trading agreements. Economic partnership agreements have already been mentioned and there are issues with the current EPA negotiations. First, there is a lack of scrutiny over the negotiation. Secondly, the ACP groups will be moving from non-reciprocal preferential access to reciprocal trading agreements. Thirdly, in direct contrast to the WTO Doha development round, no commitment has been made on the consideration of an ACP country's development status. If the Minister has time, I would welcome his stating the Government's position on those three issues.

There are also concerns regarding the "Everything but Arms" agreements. The Minister will be aware that the utilisation of those agreements among least-developed countries has been very small—only 3 per cent.—the main reason being that many countries prefer the Cotonou agreement, because the EBA is non-contractual and offers less stability. Unfortunately, the stringent rules of origin within the EBA arrangements have deterred the ACP countries, as they are prevented from sourcing products from other ACP countries. I support the argument that the rules of origin have been set excessively tightly and should be relaxed to allow poorer countries to gain maximum benefit. It is also debateable whether the EBA agreement should require LDCs to provide reciprocal market access to the EU prior to graduation from LDC status.

Other hon. Members have rightly mentioned the common agricultural policy, which has encouraged over-production until recently, and continues to do so, distorts prices, imposes high tariffs on imports and subsidises exports. Over the past five years, EU export subsidies have amounted to a staggering £20 billion. Further reform of the CAP is essential. It has been estimated that food and farming in developing countries would increase by $7.5 billion per year, making a significant contribution to alleviating poverty, particularly in Africa. There is an argument that ACP countries should not have to open their markets to EU agricultural products until all the EU's trade-distorting subsidies have been removed. There must be a transition period before full reciprocity occurs in the agricultural sector and that should be linked to CAP reform.

[Mark Simmonds]

Export dumping, as the hon. Member for Ogmore said, is one of the most damaging of all current distortions in world trade practices. Developing countries' agricultural sectors, which are vital for food security, rural livelihoods, poverty reduction and trade, are being crippled by the practice of major commodities being sold at well below the cost of production prices in world markets. EU consumers and taxpayers are forced to finance policies that damage developing countries. Oxfam recently calculated that EU wheat is exported at prices that are 34 per cent. below the cost of production. The price of skimmed milk powder is 50 per cent. and that of sugar 25 per cent. below the cost of production. I hope that the Minister will agree that the continuation of such trade policies is completely unacceptable. Would he outline the Government's position towards export dumping and tell us what steps the UK is taking to work with EU partners and the US to end that practice?

The Conservative party supports much of what the trade justice lobby has done in bringing fair trade to the top of the political agenda. Protectionist measures that shelter some EU and US farming products are not free and fair trade. The trade justice lobby believes that fair trade requires some protectionism on behalf of developing countries. However, as the hon. Member for Twickenham rightly pointed out, high levels of infant industry protection, including total bans on competing imports, particularly in the absence of offsetting incentives to exports, are extremely inefficient. That has been tried before. In the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, local industries were protected behind tariff walls in a bid to make them more competitive. Unfortunately, they remained uncompetitive infant industries. The ruling elite merely raked off monopoly profits. The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned India, which had high protectionist barriers. When the tariff barriers were removed, the Taiwanese, in particular, destroyed much of the heavy industry, especially the steel industry, that was protected in India.

The newly industrialised countries of Asia have tried a much more export-orientated approach that exploited foreign investment to boost local capacity and to compete internationally. The result is two decades of growth that have lifted many millions of people out of poverty. However, we must be aware that as countries move towards freer trade, they will not be able to make the transition overnight. It is our duty to support such countries during the transition period.

There are also serious concerns about the pace of liberalisation, particularly as it affects the fiscal situation of developing countries. If the ACP countries reduced or were forced to reduce their tariffs too fast, there would be significant problems for their revenues. The World Bank has estimated that the EU's tariff-free access to their markets will incur losses amounting to 1 per cent. of GDP and 10 per cent. of the Government revenue for sub-Saharan African countries. This must be closely monitored.

We must also recognise that much of the poverty across Africa is a result of economic mismanagement, misrule, corruption and the misguided ideology of certain African rulers. The failure of many African countries to establish good governance, the rule of law and economic stability has clearly contributed to poverty and suffering. To arrest that trend and lift populations out of poverty, African Governments must create the conditions in which a market economy can develop and thrive: the rule of law, stable Governments and the establishment of private property rights.

In conclusion, the level of poverty around the world is unacceptable. Nearly half the world's population live on less than a dollar a day. One billion people do not have access to clean water; 100 million children do not go to school and 40 million are suffering from HIV/AIDS. We have a moral duty to take action. Trade, both free and fair, is the best means of alleviating poverty in a sustainable way in the developing world.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on the quality of the case he made. At the risk of upsetting other hon. Members, I suspect that only a true Welshman could have managed such lyricism, passion and fluency. I agree with the first point that he made very strongly: as a Government we warmly welcome the Make Poverty History campaign, the Live 8 concerts and the campaigning of Bob Geldof and others. It is helpful to have so many groups and individuals campaigning hard not just in Britain but across Europe and the rest of the developed world.

As my hon. Friend and others rightly said, we recognise that there is a huge opportunity for the developed world to do something for Africa and to make a real difference this year. Britain has a particular responsibility as we will host the G8 summit and hold the presidency of the European Union. There is a real opportunity this year, not only because of the G8 summit, with Africa as one of its centrepiece agenda items, but because there will be a five-year review of the millennium development goals at the UN summit in September, and because the World Trade Organisation talks are taking place in December. The Government have made it clear that, for 2005, we want to prioritise Africa and to see more progress on aid, debt and trade.

I also welcome the contributions made by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who in this debate is lurking on the Back Benches. I agree broadly with the thrust of what he said. The World Trade Organisation is an absolutely critical body, democratic in its structures. He was right to make the points that a rule-based trading system is crucial in protecting the interests of developing countries and that we must continue to work to support and develop its effectiveness.

If I had one slight quibble with the hon. Gentleman's broad analysis, it was on the issue of food security, where I believe that there is a case for protection of some products, although the question is: what products? I flag up to him and to other hon. Members that we are working with ActionAid and the Food and Agriculture Organisation to try to identify what products should be given that special product status.

I also welcome the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North (Ann McKechin), and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to

her campaigning work on debt relief, particularly during the last Parliament. I hope that a series of objectives in respect of debt relief will soon be achieved, including the 100 per cent. write-off of the poorest nations' debts to the World Bank and the African Development Bank. As she knows, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is engaged in talking about that issue and also about aid.

That brings me to the point about the US made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore and by other hon. Members. We will continue to have very active discussions with the Americans across a whole range of development issues between now and the end of 2005. It is crucial to get their agreement and support for development across that range of issues—not just on debt relief, which is attracting so much attention this week, but on aid. The announcement that President Bush made yesterday is welcome, but there is a series of other things that we want the US to make progress on, particularly on trade, and we will continue to talk to them in the run-up to Hong Kong.

I agree with the fundamental point made by all hon. Members that despite rapid globalisation and growth in trade over the past decade, Africa's share of world trade has more than halved. We should not continue to accept that situation. Oxfam estimates that a 1 per cent. increase in Africa's share of world trade would be worth five times as much as the continent's current share of aid and debt relief. There is therefore a huge prize to be won for those of us interested in development and helping Africa and in making progress in the current round of trade talks.

Although few would disagree that trade is an important engine for growth, we must also recognise that for that engine to push full steam ahead, there are a series of other obstacles, in addition to unfair trading rules, on which we need to try to make progress. That is related to the point about aid for trade made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore. The series of other obstacles that we need to work on may concern infrastructure—to which, I believe, the hon. Member for Twickenham alluded—or developing the capacity of Ministries of Trade, or access to capital for businesses to develop. Indeed, we are in discussions with our G8 partners and with the other international financial institutions on aid-for-trade support. Trade and development are global issues; they require a global response. The UK and the EU on their own can make a difference, but they are not the sole solution to the situation in which we find ourselves.

It is clear that the failure of the Cancun talks remains in the back of everyone's mind. None of us want a repeat in Hong Kong of what happened in Cancun. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North rightly made clear, several positive things emerged from Cancun, not least the clarity of the developing nations' voice in the process. The agreement on the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights is also welcome.

Like my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, the Government also welcome the breakthrough last year on the terms of the July framework agreement, which paved the way for negotiations to continue. As she said; there is a long way to go before the aims of the Doha development round are realised, but we expect by the end of July to have the first draft of the package of measures for discussion at Hong Kong. Again, that is part of the process to build up the momentum that will be necessary if we are to achieve an effective and ambitious agreement.

Undoubtedly, agriculture is central to the trade talks and to securing a good outcome from the Doha development round. We are addressing the grave distortions in agricultural markets that prevent developing countries from trading their way out of poverty. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds) referred to cotton. In Benin, cotton accounts for some 85 per cent. of total exports and 20 per cent. of the national income, but its producers, who are very poor, must compete with heavily subsidised EU and US producers. Bearing in mind that, in 2001, the US gave more in assistance to its cotton farmers—$4 billion—than the entire gross domestic product of Benin, one gets some sense of just how unfairly the WTO rules are stacked against developing nations.

The EU has committed itself to abolishing all its export subsidies. We need to agree an end-date with the Americans and other developed countries during the WTO negotiations. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness and others asked how the Government were taking forward such negotiations. We are pressing in the discussions for the end-date to be 2010, as we made clear in our manifesto. We have not changed our position on that, and we continue to have discussions on that basis.

Let me deal with economic partnership agreements and try to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North and other hon. Members that our position on them has not changed. The letter that the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) referred to was from a particular EU official, albeit a senior official. I do not agree with his attempt to assess our motives in the position paper that we drew up in March. We are having a series of discussions with other EU nations to try to secure their support for the position that we have advocated. In talks that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have had with partners in Europe, we have pressed the case for our position on EPAs, and we will continue to do so. Indeed, at the end of this month, I shall be meeting counterparts at an ACP-EU ministerial meeting, and I hope to hear from them at first hand how negotiations are proceeding.

On the point of the hon. Member for St. Ives about alternatives to EPAs, the Government have funded some research on what alternatives might look like, and have made it available to those who are taking part in the negotiations so that they have the information to hand. The ACP negotiators whom I have met have indicated that they want the discussions around EPAs to continue at present—they are still very much in the early stages—but we shall keep in touch with them should they want further discussions with us about alternatives to EPAs.

The Government made very clear their views on forced liberalisation. We do not believe that policy choices should be forced on developing countries through aid and debt relief. We shall try to increase the transparency of our arrangements by publishing the conditions that we attach. I hope that that answers most of the points made by hon. Members.

Khat

4 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): I draw attention to this issue because of constituency reasons. Eight weeks ago, I was on a tube train on the Jubilee line in central London in the middle of a weekday afternoon when three young men who were probably 14, 15 or 16 years old got on to the train, carrying between them a large plastic bag containing stalks with leaves. They proceeded to spend the whole journey picking the leaves and chewing them. It was the first time that I had ever seen that on a tube train, and I wondered what the significance of it was. The three young men were clearly intoxicated and in their own world, taking part in something that was important to them.

The young men were Somali. During the recent election campaign, I had lots of discussions with members of my local Somali community. After that, I thought that it was important to raise this issue as early as possible in this Parliament. People in my Somali community in Ilford tell me that the consumption of khat—there are at least 40 different words for the substance in different languages—is a growing social and community problem. It is not just a problem for the Somali community, because it is not only Somalis who are chewing the leaves of this shrub. It is a wider problem, which could become serious unless the Government take some action to deal with it.

What is khat? It grows throughout the Arab peninsula, north-east Africa and other parts of the world. It is a shrub that grows 6 to 12 ft high and is known scientifically as Catha edulis. It goes by 40 different street names, including qat, kat, chat, gat, tohai, tschat and mirra. It has been grown interspersed with coffee in many countries and is very profitable for the producers. It has been suggested to me that in war-ravaged, divided Somalia, the production, sale and export of the plant are as valuable as the heroin poppy in parts of Afghanistan. That raises big questions about what will happen.

Chewed in moderation, as it has been for centuries, khat alleviates fatigue and reduces appetite. It can create among people a social environment and mild intoxication, and that is why, for centuries, men in Muslim societies in the middle east and Africa have often enjoyed chewing it. I am told that it has an effect similar to amphetamines, which are sold illegally and sometimes legally in many parts of the world. However, if it is chewed for long periods—several hours—it can result in manic behaviour, grandiose delusions, paranoia, hallucinations and other effects. It is also believed—and there are studies to back this up—that it can have carcinogenic effects on the mouth, that it increases the possibility of heart attacks, and that it has other effects, including very serious psychotic ones, on numbers of individuals.

Yet khat is perfectly legal in this country. There are no restrictions on its sale. One can walk through certain areas and find little shops that advertise its sale in the window. That is not the case in all parts of the world. It is regarded as a schedule 1 drug in the United States, and it is controlled and banned in several European countries, Canada and New Zealand. We must therefore ask why this country has not taken action against it up to now.

Some people would say that there are cultural and community questions and sensitivities to be considered. Yes, there are, but, as the Somaliland Forum says on its website:

"This drug is eating at the fabric of society at every level. It is an economic drain as well as a social ill that has a devastating effect on the nucleus of the society—the family. What once was considered leisure has now become a necessity, like food. Its use is spreading faster than AIDS because it is accepted by society as harmless, and even those who understand its harm do not strive to educate the public of its ills."

That is from a publication in Somaliland, the northern part of Somalia.

Another publication, *The Somaliland Times*, carried a very long article by Abdul Halim M. Mussa, entitled, "The Problems of Qat for Society and Health", on the front page of issue 59. The article details the damage that khat has done in Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti and Somalia.

Another issue reports the discussions on a peace treaty in Somalia in 2004, and quotes one woman, Eng Rukia Osman Mahmoud, who was involved in the negotiations:

"Our men have become lazy over the years because of the widespread trade that forces them to just sit and enjoy the product. Our children have nothing to eat, let alone go to school, because their fathers cannot work".

She claims that

"about 75 per cent. of the eight million people in Somalia chew khat, with men and boys accounting for the largest percentage",

and concludes:

"Women and children have suffered for so long, and now that peace is in the air we have to look at ways of reconstructing the country in all aspects... This will have to involve everyone, including men, and may be more effective only if a ban has been imposed on the khat trade, because trading in this commodity poses a challenge to rebuilding efforts."

Clearly, the Somali community in this country has grown. There are also people here from Yemen and other countries in which khat is chewed and is prevalent in the culture and in society. These are difficult issues, but we usually have some control over substances that make young men in this country clearly seriously intoxicated during the day. We do not allow tobacco or alcohol to be sold to people under a certain age. We do not allow unrestricted access—in fact, we ban or strictly control access—to amphetamines, for example.

Although a few critics might say that we should, it is generally not acceptable in this country to argue for a deregulatory free-for-all in which anybody can buy and take anything that they like, regardless of the social and human costs, let alone the medical consequences for the individuals concerned and their families. Yet, khat is not controlled, and we must wonder why. People in this country can buy limitless quantities and chew the substance for hours without any control: no regulation, quality control, tax or other measures. Other countries have a different attitude.

The Government are aware of the problem, and there have been a number of parliamentary questions on the matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) asked a question in 2004 and

received a written answer from the then Home Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), which stated:

"The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs keeps the situation in respect of all controlled drugs under review. At its meeting on 2 October 2003, the Advisory Council's sub-committee the Technical Committee considered the impact of Khat. The Committee concluded that further research needed to be carried out before any informed decisions could be made.

The Home Office is in the process of commissioning a piece of research into Khat use in the United Kingdom. We expect the research to be completed by the summer of 2005." —[*Official Report*, 30 March 2004; Vol. 419, c. 1347W.]

It is almost midsummer 2005, so where is the research? I want to know, so I have been doing some digging. I have been on the Home Office website and had help from the Library, and something very interesting has happened.

On 27 May, the Home Office website, under the heading "Diversity Research", listed a report published by Turning Point called "Khat use in Somali, Ethiopian and Yemeni communities in England: issues and solutions". The website said:

"This report was commissioned to explore khat use and treatment issues in England, and to make good practice recommendations. The report interviewed individuals and carried out focus groups in the communities concerned, and consulted a range of professional drug treatment specialists".

There was a button to download the report, and we tried, but the report was not there because it had not yet been published. I went online again last night, to see whether it had been published, but found that the passage had disappeared. I do not know why it was taken off the website, but that is strange.

Today, the Library helpfully sent me an e-mail that said that the parliamentary and briefing delivery unit of the Home Office had informed it that

"We intend to publish this report in the autumn."

I wonder whether the report is finished. I do not know the reason for the delay, and I wonder whether something is going on internally. Will the Minister explain what is happening and why there has suddenly been a memory hole? The report has disappeared, and I do not know why.

More seriously, when the report is published—I hope that it will be soon, in the autumn and not later in the year or next year—I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to all the growing scientific evidence. I refer them to an article on the BioMed Central website entitled "Khat use as risk factor for psychotic disorders: A cross-sectional and case-control study in Somalia". I refer them also to the *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology* in May 2005, and the article entitled "Khat chewing is a risk factor for acute myocardial infarction: a case-control study". There is lots of growing evidence about the damaging effects on health, and we have also heard evidence from the community. In the words of one of my constituents speaking about Khat yesterday,

"This is a menace. It should be banned. It is dangerous and ruins family life."

That Somali-British mother is aware of the issues and the damage that is being caused in our communities.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Gapes: No.

I believe strongly that the Government must now give serious consideration to the reports in their possession and to any forthcoming reports. The potential damage must be considered, because there is growing evidence of khat being exported. I have been studying the local press. A newspaper in Milton Keynes reported on 3 February that people from Milton Keynes had been arrested in the United States. It said:

"Travellers from Milton Keynes have been turned back at US airports after trying to smuggle in the drug qat . . .

It is understood armed American customs officers caught at least five "mules"—recruited in Milton Keynes—with the leafy narcotic in their luggage during the last 12 months."

People try to fly the drug across the world because its potency when fresh lasts only for about 48 hours.

Paul Flynn: It is illegal in the United States.

Mike Gapes: It is illegal in the United States, and I am glad that it is. If my hon. Friend wants his own debate on the subject he is entitled to ask Mr. Speaker for one, but I am not giving way at the moment, however many times he tries to interrupt me.

The Minister needs sufficient time to respond, so I will conclude with a plea that the Government have widespread consultation with Somali and other communities in this country and listen to the views of clinical psychologists, the medical profession and those who can see the damaging consequences of khat consumption in this country and internationally. There is growing evidence of those consequences and we must not be in the position of other countries taking action to deal with the problem when we have not.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Paul Goggins): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes) on securing this debate. Assiduous as he always is, he has brought his constituents' concerns to Parliament and I am delighted that he has had an early opportunity to raise those concerns. He may have known about the matter in detail for only a short period, but he has clearly become something of an expert already and I am sure that he will continue to make his views known in Parliament.

As my hon. Friend explained, khat is a leaf that is traditionally chewed, although it can be made into a tea. It is grown only in east Africa and the southern Arabian peninsula, mainly Yemen. The plant has been used for centuries in that region and has traditionally been used by some Muslims to enhance religious meetings dedicated to praying and reading the Koran. Khat gives the user a mild amphetamine-like euphoria and takes half an hour or so of chewing before taking effect. Users report feeling more alert and talkative, with increased energy levels. It is said to increase self-esteem and create a sensation of well-being.

Typically, in those communities where khat use is prevalent—primarily Somalia, but also Yemen and Ethiopia—the older males of the family chew the plant

[Paul Goggins]

for some hours. That can be significantly disruptive to lifestyle and we know that khat use has associated physical health problems due to lack of sleep and food intake, related oral infections and, anecdotally, an increase in aggression levels. Mental health issues from longer-term use should also be considered.

Crucially, there are also wider social issues. Wives of habitual chewers report having effectively been made lone parents by their husbands' spells in khat dens. It is reported that teenage boys as young as 15—perhaps similar to the boys whom my hon. Friend saw on the tube—are chewing khat because it is the only way to communicate with their fathers. There are also suggestions that women are increasingly using khat, although that is said to be socially unacceptable and to take place in secret.

Evidence suggests that individuals using khat excessively are at an increased risk of losing their role in the community and becoming isolated. Prolonged daily use often means absence from family life, unemployment and social exclusion. There are also considerable social costs to the rest of the family in terms of poverty and sometimes, regrettably, domestic violence. It can also affect communities as a whole, leading to a lack of male role models and community cohesion, and increased exclusion from the wider community.

That raises important questions about what can be done. Treatment is similar to that for other stimulants. The National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse is leading the development of a range of service provisions for non-opiate drug misuse—including stimulants—and is encouraging the development of treatment in the context of assessed need. Drug action teams are expected to review the provision of services and ensure that they commission services that are appropriate and relevant to the communities that they serve. In theory, therefore, where a local primary care trust or a drug action team identifies a particular need on behalf of khat misusers, local commissioning should be able to address that.

However, the greatest impact may be social rather than physical. As I have already explained, khat use may result in the frequent absence of the man in the house from family life. As with other substance misuse, if the individual is a regular user, it is also likely that they may have difficulties securing employment or maintaining sustainable full-time employment. That often causes tremendous domestic tension—something that my hon. Friend referred to—especially when spending money on khat becomes an economic drain on the family's income. Heavy khat use can cause increased aggression in the individual, which I know my hon. Friend is also concerned about. Given that common family tension, regrettably, as I said before, the result is sometimes domestic violence.

I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Home Office keeps a close eye on the situation. He referred to the Home Office website and difficulties he had in finding some information that he had previously managed to locate. He was kind enough to alert me to that earlier and I reassure him that I have already set in train an investigation to find out precisely what happened. I assure him that by the end of this week the Home Office website will be fully updated with all the information that we have about this issue, including the ongoing studies and the *Hansard* transcript of this debate. I will certainly ensure that all the information that we have is freely available on the website.

As I said, the Home Office keeps a close eye on the patterns of khat misuse in this country. The Government have funded and supported two separate pieces of research by Turning Point and the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders into the impact of khat misuse. Those two reports will hopefully be published in the next few months and certainly by the end of the year—whether in the autumn or slightly earlier remains to be seen.

Paul Flynn: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Paul Goggins: I am reluctant to give way because the tradition of the House is that that is done with the agreement of the Member who secured the debate and the Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South was clearly not happy to accept an intervention, so although I often make interventions myself, I regret that on this occasion I do not feel that I ought to accept one. The Member who secured the Adjournment debate has to be happy about interventions and agree to them.

The work by Turning Point was commissioned specifically to map users' needs in terms of service provision. It will identify the treatment services currently provided, establish where there are gaps in service provision and consider examples of good practice—not just by drug agencies—in supporting khat users. The report will help the Home Office to address the concerns of the Somali community in respect of khat misuse as part of our wider diversity strategy. It will include a review of the availability of appropriate drug-prevention materials and information to raise awareness among practitioners and the community. Ultimately, the work should help local drug action teams and treatment services to develop good practice and support systems to deal with the real and current problems presented by khat misuse.

The NACRO research is a longer-term piece of work and will look specifically at the impact of khat use among Somali communities living in the UK. That follows up a study carried out by Paul Griffiths for the Home Office in 1998, which was called "Qat use in London: a study of qat use among a sample of Somalis living in London." That publication may be of interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South.

The new study will examine the issue in more depth and in particular will investigate levels of khat use, changes in level of use and any associations with other types of substance misuse, the relationship between khat use and crack use by some Somali women, and any offending behaviour associated with khat use. Some members of the Somali community have suggested that the misuse of khat is symptomatic of the social isolation of Somalis in Britain. Since the bulk of the community began arriving 12 years ago, the population has roughly trebled in size but continues to be segregated, living in our inner city areas.

The community appears to be divided fairly evenly on whether khat should be a controlled substance. There are concerns about the lack of treatment for khat use

and a lack of support for associated mental health problems, which we are now addressing by way of the research that I have mentioned already. However, there are also concerns about the underlying causes of khat misuse. For example, poor housing and overcrowding are said to be common among Somali families, making young people reluctant to go home and causing them to feel vulnerable.

There are higher levels of unemployment in the Somali community and there is a lack of recognition for professional and educational qualifications obtained in Somalia. We know that a disproportionately low number of Somali young people obtain the grades necessary to attend university, which can lead to low self-esteem and a perceived need to use stimulants as a form of escapism. Those issues will be covered by NACRO and Turning Point in their research, and we look forward to the publication of the relevant papers.

On the question of whether khat ought to be brought under the control of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the Government look to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs for advice on whether to classify substances as controlled drugs. The ACMD last formally considered the misuse of khat in 1988 and advised that there was not sufficient evidence at that time of a social problem arising from its misuse in the United Kingdom to justify bringing the plant under the controls of the 1971 Act.

The minutes of the ACMD's technical committee meeting from 11 January 1988 stated that an international conference in Madagascar in 1983 first raised global concerns about khat. The minute went on to note that the ACMD had been advised that although the plant grew naturally in east Africa, it had been informed by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew that it might be possible to grow the crop in greenhouse conditions and in the warmer climate of the south-west—for example, on the Isles of Scilly. I am pleased to say that domestic production has not become a reality, and I am sure that my hon. Friend is grateful for that.

As I said, the ACMD concluded in 1988 that khat misuse was not a problem in the UK and that therefore controls under the 1971 Act were not justified. I know that the ACMD has kept a watching brief over the issue of khat in more recent years. Before the general election, during consideration of the Drugs Bill, the Opposition tabled amendments to have khat classified as a class A drug. The then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), resisted the move during the debate, but undertook to write to the ACMD to request a comprehensive study of khat, especially in the light of the research to which I have already referred. I am reliably informed that during its last meeting on 19 May, the ACMD formally established a khat working group to consider the matter and carry out that important work. I am sure that my hon. Friend looks forward to the further deliberations of the ACMD, and I promise to ensure that his concerns and a transcript of this debate are brought to the attention of the advisory council.

Regional Airports (Security)

4.30 pm

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I am delighted that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), will respond to this debate. I watched him on his first outing at Home Office Questions, and he behaved with considerable panache. He surprised me, because I asked him an unscheduled question about identity fraud, which he could not have expected. He not only answered the question, which is laudable in a Minister and a little surprising, but he knew that I had asked previous questions on the subject. I formed the impression there and then that this is a Minister who means to do business and who does his homework.

We all accept that the Minister has taken on a challenging role. I should like him today in so far as it is possible to help to solve a problem that relates to his role and that confronts me. I want him to provide an assurance that is fundamental to the debate about security and immigration. I recognise that it is not too easy for him to provide that particular assurance, but it is needed. It is especially important to those who want a balanced approach to such topics, and who are not, as some politicians appear to be, paranoid, xenophobic, in some cases racist, and alarmist.

I want the Minister to provide an assurance that gives real credibility to the Government's approach to such issues as immigration and security. It is the assurance that the rules about entering the country are kept and kept properly. We are all aware from our constituency work that people who want to abide by the rules and who have legitimate cause to be in the country or to enter the country often find it difficult to do so. It is therefore particularly annoying when some people appear to abuse or to get around the rules.

I suspect that it is less easy for the Minister to provide such an assurance when regional airports are considered. That belief has grown as a result of information that has reached me about my own regional airport, Liverpool John Lennon airport. It is my local airport, and I wish to see it prosper and thrive. It is typical of a new generation of regional airports. They are expanding, and there are more and more flights. Recent figures show how much some carriers flying to those airports are growing their business. The airport is typical of such regional airports, as it attracts largely the budget carriers, the no-frills airlines, rather than many scheduled flights. Owing to its dealing largely with non-scheduled flights, it is typical also because it does not have to pay the high levies paid by airports such as Heathrow, Gatwick and Birmingham for security, policing and all the other ramifications of being a major international airport. That is possibly where the problem starts.

I knew that people had come in through Liverpool airport, had been detained and had subsequently absconded, and I knew broadly what the causes were. The problem was caused by inadequate numbers of immigration staff to cope with the flow of business. Business can be quite hectic and often at quite problematic times such as the middle of night, when some of the no-frills airlines are happy to use airspace, and some of the scheduled airlines are not.

[Dr. John Pugh]

I knew that the problem stemmed in part from a lack of proper secure accommodation, and I knew also that there were poor arrangements for detaining people for reasons of immigration or security. I knew that the arrangements for removal were the subject of a private contract, which was itself the subject of certain negotiations, and that at times the contract or immigration activities had to be supplemented by special branch, which was not contracted to do so but had stepped into the breach.

I accepted that there were problems for the airport. There were problems for the police, who had to deal with people in the community who had no right to be there. There were problems for airline security, which in some cases would not know who such people properly were. There were also problems for the airport owners, who would prefer everyone to enter and leave the airport properly identified and registered, and for the carriers, who of course were providing the business. There were a number of people in play, and several reasons why sorting out such matters would be problematic.

Knowing that, I tabled some simple, straightforward questions to the Home Secretary, asking how many entrants to the country had arrived at John Lennon airport who had subsequently absconded. I asked some time ago, and I said that I wished to examine the figures for the past three years. I received the answer that information on the number of entrants at individual ports who had absconded or not reported back was available only by examining individual case files at a disproportionate cost. That led me to form the impression that the Home Office simply did not know.

I did not believe the Home Office—it was probably safer not to do so—but had I done so, I would have been disappointed that it could not provide information that I already had, at least in part. I knew that there were absconders from Liverpool airport; I knew that they included people from a range of nationalities, including people of Asian, Chinese and Nigerian extraction; and I knew that some of them had subsequently attracted the attention of special branch—not, I am glad to say, in connection with terrorist offences, which would have been critical, but in connection with people trafficking and the like.

By that stage, I was in possession of an e-mail from the chief immigration officer at Liverpool, which stated:

"The Immigration Officers working at JLA cannot, and should not, be held responsible for the high number of absconders we have there. They all work extremely well under adverse circumstances, often performing tasks outside their remit. The quality of casework is high—there are facilitators, imposters and holders of bogus documents arriving at this airport . . . Liverpool JLA is under-resourced in terms of staff and facilities and the staff are working under a great deal of pressure to maintain the integrity of the control. Indeed, the lack of detention facilities"—

this went on for some time, it being a critical problem—

"has meant that the control has been compromised on many occasions".

So, I already knew that. I also knew that there was good evidence of what one could call recurrent scams. One was of tourists from Brazil on magical mystery tours. Each group arrived at Liverpool JLA with the same travel agency. They were regarded with some suspicion, but owing to the prevailing circumstances at the airport, they had to be discharged. They normally stayed for one night in a hotel—one of the cheapest but not the cheapest—and the following day most of the tour party had gone, presumably to tour elsewhere, and the only person remaining was the courier or the travel operator's representative. That scam was repeated on more than one occasion. I have every expectation that some of those people are abroad in this country, no doubt clutching plausible-looking Portuguese identity documents.

Since raising the issue—I did not do so to be difficult, but in order to have the problem solved—I have been to the Home Office and spoken to those in charge of the airports, and I have been given assurances that new, more secure procedures will be put in place and that there will be a northern command. The airport people tell me that new systems will be developed that will make such problems a thing of the past. I am grateful for those assurances; I am pleased to see that new rigour.

The point is made—I accept that it is valid—that much of the security that we need and require is fairly covert. People are tracked on flights by others not wearing uniforms who work for the Home Office or an agency, with a view to ensuring that we all travel safely and that there are no highly undesirable customers on our flights. I accept that not all security is up front, but the problem has not gone entirely. Since I made all those points, there has been an industrial dispute at Liverpool, this time involving the airport security—those who control the airport grounds. People working for Securicor—I believe that that is the firm and apologise if it is not—have complained about the low rate of wages that they are paid for doing a critical job.

More embarrassingly, in the run-up to the general election, I was contacted by Mercury Press, which told me that the car park firm covering the vicinity of the airport was employing illegal immigrants. I did not discover that story myself. In other words, there were people walking around the airport car park of whose identity nobody could be truly certain. I accept the explanation that the airport gave me—some of those people should have been checked, and that the firm was checked and that its tender was by no means the lowest—but I remain to be convinced that we are entirely on top of the problem.

As a result of my interest in the area, I have received reports from other airports; I do not think that Liverpool is the only airport at which circumstances may be less than ideal. I have been told anecdotally of people wandering through places in Coventry airport where they ought not to be. I am reliably assured that in the past few weeks a Chinese woman arrived at John Lennon airport, refused to talk to anybody and presented no documents. She is now simply gone; we do not know where she is. I suspect that she is somewhere in the country, but she is not known by or identified to us. One can consider that case as a specific. One Chinese woman is not Osama bin Laden, but my point is that if the fact that that can happen is no secret to me it is certainly no secret to far more cunning people who run human trafficking or drugs into the country and have malevolent intentions.

I require an assurance that the problem is recognised and that there is an intention to address it seriously. Most informed opinion would say that people who wish

to get into the country for no good reason would not go through the fearsome apparatus that we have set up in places such as Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester or Birmingham. They will use no-frills carriers and expanding airports. When things tighten up at Liverpool, they will move to other expanding airports. Blackpool is one airport that wishes to expand.

Immigration and security need to expand just as fast or the regional airport will become the Achilles heel of the system. That means that a number of things should happen, which most of those airports would recognise, as would most of the staff working at them. It means a review of funding for the security arrangements and immigration facilities. It means a review of staffing—basically, more people are required. One of the great problems in Liverpool was the shift pattern, which meant that an employee would have to leave somebody whom they had detained in order to deal with another flight coming in. I believe that that situation has been rectified; I sincerely hope that it has.

The situation at Liverpool could just as easily be replicated at Blackpool or at any other regional airport that wishes to expand three, four or five years down the line. We need better integration of security. One of the problems at Liverpool, where a number of organisations were involved with security in one way or another—car park security, airport security, immigration security, special branch, local police and a range of other people—and one of the anomalies of the immigration episode relating to the car park was that some of the people one expected to be informed and know about such situations were not informed by the local police. Sometimes one hand does not know what the other hand is doing.

Fundamentally, we need the problem to be taken seriously. One element requires significant resource commitment. When somebody is picked up as problematic, difficult and not having proper documentation—in other words, under suspicion—then, given that the person has committed an offence, there needs to be a capacity to progress rapidly to prosecution where possible. We need prosecution services to back up detention arrangements—if I may put it like that—so that the reputation of the airport and of England internationally is one of dealing forcefully with people who deliberately intend to breach arrangements.

I am talking not about asylum seekers, but about people who seek illegal entry into the country knowing that they are doing so. In Liverpool only a few weeks ago, there was a case of a Nigerian who arrived with a Belgian passport. We would all agree that Belgian passports are among those most commonly used by people who arrive with fraudulent intent. The said person was sent out of Liverpool and back to France, from where they had come. They were not prosecuted there and then in Liverpool, although perhaps they could not have been; I do not know the circumstances as precisely as I might. However, I do know that after they were sent back they reappeared a few days later with the same document at Stansted airport, and that there was the same outcome. Had that person been more forcefully addressed at one port of call, they would not have appeared at the other.

The last thing that I want to do is discourage the expansion of regional airports, which are huge economic drivers in many regions and can do a great deal for regeneration. I hope that John Lennon, Coventry and Blackpool airports do the business in their areas and become a basis for increased prosperity. However, it takes only one major incident to destroy all the good work and public relations of a good, thriving local airport. At any airport, the under-resourcing of the immigration—or any other—department, and inadequate contracts with private firms that are supposed to provide security, will ultimately undermine sound immigration policy and sound security.

I do not come here in a spirit of aggression or of trying to find difficulties, but with a problem that has, as it were, arrived on my desk and that I have endeavoured to solve. We ought not to mask that problem, but to address it. I look forward to the Minister's reply and hope that he will accept that we have a problem, although he may describe it differently. I hope that we can all join together in considering how it can be addressed and in believing, as I am sure we all do, that it ought to be addressed, and addressed fairly rapidly.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Andy Burnham): I thank the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) for his kind words at the beginning of the debate and for his assiduous work on this issue, particularly with respect to John Lennon airport. As he knows, I am a Greater Manchester Member of Parliament but, as a native of Liverpool and with a constituency that borders Merseyside, I find that John Lennon airport is local to me too. It is probably almost as close to the hon. Gentleman's constituency as it is to mine, and I use it regularly. As long as I am the Minister in this job, I can assure him that it will receive regular unannounced visits from me.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have been in this job for only a few weeks, but we have already exchanged words about identity fraud and theft across the Floor of the House, and today we are discussing improving even further our immigration controls. He shares many of my concerns about such issues. I see him as a Liberal Democrat who is perhaps ready to support identity cards. I hope that I am right in that assumption; we shall find out in a few weeks.

The hon. Gentleman asked for assurances on a number of issues and was right to do so. He said that the rules set are kept, and that reflects the integrity of the immigration system. Adequate levels of control at regional airports should be maintained, in which respect staffing and resources are appropriate. I shall come on to each of those issues.

I shall set out some background. There are 41 permanently staffed air and seaports of entry in the UK, approximately 350 smaller ports that receive fewer than 100,000 arrivals a year and a number of registered and unregistered airfields. At the smaller ports, immigration service resources are deployed from the permanently staffed ports to meet arriving traffic. In addition, powers provided under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 are used to clear passengers—for example, with written notification to the carrier—when that is appropriate. Passengers subject to control are examined to determine

[Andy Burnham]

whether they qualify for entry. That examination includes checks against the UK immigration service database.

The hon. Gentleman specifically referred to regional airports. The debate taps into the issue of regional airports in this country, which are flourishing, particularly given the growth of low-cost airlines. He will know that roughly 100 million people pass through UK ports each year. That figure is increasing rapidly, particularly at airports, because of the growth in low-cost carriers. Those services are focused on some of the smaller regional airports. That has been an extremely welcome development in boosting not only the regional but the sub-regional economy, particularly of Merseyside, as I think he recognised at the end of his remarks.

The success of John Lennon airport is playing a significant role in the wider revival and regeneration of Liverpool and Merseyside. The airport has seen a 29 per cent. increase in traffic levels, to 331,000 passengers in April 2005, compared with 256,000 during the same period of 2004—an increase of 75,000. The hon. Gentleman is therefore right to say that the airport's importance is increasing, and what I have described is also true of other airports.

The increase in traffic presents challenges. It means that the operation of the immigration service must be flexible to ensure robust, effective and efficient control, and I think I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have that. I assure him and the Chamber that the immigration service has kept traffic flows under careful review across the regional airports of this country. We have responded with practical steps at regional airports to ensure the integrity of our immigration system. Indeed, complaints are reaching Ministers that the processes are too rigorous. I have already received a few letters from MPs saying that processes are too rigorous at some regional airports. People are perhaps not used to having to queue to have their passport swiped.

That process, introduced last year, is one way in which the Government are enhancing the security of the process at regional airports. There are other ways. The immigration service operates an intelligence-led approach to border control. All flights are risk-assessed in advance of arrival, and resources are deployed accordingly. Enhanced document checks were introduced on the EU control on 31 March 2004. That means that all documents are seen and handled and, if a risk is sufficiently high, checks are carried out against the immigration database by swiping all European economic area documents. That was not the case until recently. Those enhanced measures have had an impact on processing times, and some passengers now need to queue for a little longer at ports of entry, but we believe that that is a proportionate response in terms of securing our borders.

The immigration service is in the final stages of an internal restructuring process, also begun on 31 March 2004, which has separated border control and enforcement activities into discrete national directorates. As I think the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, those matters were previously handled together under a regional structure; now, the functions have been separated and there is a focused border directorate. That allows the two directorates to engage more effectively with their stakeholders and to target resources more efficiently, and it enables both border and enforcement staff to have a clearer focus on delivery throughout the country.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned staffing. About 500 new front-line staff are being recruited this year, some of whom will help to bring regional airports up to their staffing complement. Increases in passenger numbers are taken into account when determining a port's staffing complement and the associated financial bids to fund any additional posts. An external recruitment campaign is being conducted for Heathrow, with internal trawls for immigration officers at Birmingham, Bristol, Gatwick, Glasgow, Luton and Manchester completed, under way or due to commence.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, to reflect the increase in passenger traffic, Liverpool John Lennon airport has recently increased its staffing to 10 permanent immigration officers and one chief immigration officer. That is up from seven and no presence at CIO grade. In addition, 15 immigration officers are to be posted to Manchester to provide a more flexible capability to respond to the needs of other airports in the area, such as Liverpool. Similarly, 12 additional immigration officers are to be posted to Birmingham to provide additional cover at Coventry airport, which, like Liverpool, is seeing an increase in traffic. I think that the hon. Gentleman referred to that.

Within each command, the deputy director can flexibly deploy staff resources as priorities and risk assessments dictate. A ports modernisation project has been initiated to establish a template for a model office and to identify gaps and deficiencies in resources, facilities, equipment and accommodation at individual regional ports, although the hon. Gentleman has, on this issue, focused on Liverpool.

Much has already been done to improve the facilities at regional airports. The POISE IT system used in the Home Office is being introduced to regional airports that do not have that facility. I hope that that, in part, answers the hon. Gentleman's legitimate concerns about the quality of data being held and processed.

Dr. Pugh: I am relieved to hear that, as one of the issues raised by staff in Liverpool was the inadequacy of IT provision. Such provision is obviously critical in tracking people from country to country. I would be grateful to the Minister if he could expand further on that point.

Andy Burnham: I can a little. The system will provide much better management of information on passenger flows through Liverpool, and it will be rolled out to the airport before the end of this year. It is a staged process, which is happening with other airports—Bristol, Coventry, Humberside, Leeds, Bradford, Prestwick and Newcastle—being the priorities. All other permanently staffed non-POISE enabled airports will have the system by 1 October 2005.

The duty to provide port facilities for the operation of immigration control is in section 25 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. That provision commenced in April 2003 and obliges the manager of a control port—a port where a control area has been designated under the Immigration Act 1971—to provide free of charge to the Secretary of State such facilities at the port as he may direct as being necessary.

Each port is unique, and a dialogue is maintained between the immigration managers and port control managers to provide, refurbish or extend facilities in line with the volume and nature of passenger traffic arriving at the location. Solutions may be devised and implemented during the project, which is targeted to complete work on 31 December 2005. Some work has already been undertaken, and more is ongoing, to improve the provision of services and service delivery at regional airports. For example, as the hon. Gentleman may know, the immigration service moved to new accommodation at Liverpool John Lennon airport in April, and that provided a larger immigration hall and new office facilities.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned absconders. A great deal of work is being done on that and is being put into detention capability at airports across the UK. The new escort and holding room contract, which came into effect on 1 May, provides both an enhanced response time to escorting requests and additional support for regional airports. Holding room cover has been extended to include provision for 24-hour cover at both Manchester and Ramsgate, and in addition arrangements are now being effected to extend contractual coverage to Liverpool, with a new temporary holding facility becoming operational from 1 July, which is in about three weeks.

To conclude, all these steps are contributing to significant progress in securing the UK's borders. Asylum applications fell from 8,770 in October 2002 to 4,225 in September 2003, a drop of 52 per cent. That success has continued; monthly applications have fallen a further 22 per cent. in the first quarter of 2005, compared with the first quarter of 2004, and are now down to the lowest monthly levels since March 1997. That has been achieved by deploying a wide range of measures, some of which I have outlined today, to strengthen our border controls both in the UK and abroad.

Having said that, I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are not complacent. I think that he wanted an assurance that we will continue to keep the problem under review and deploy resources where necessary. The Government have a significant number of steps under way to improve further the security of our borders, such as the e-borders scheme, which will further develop the technology used to monitor passenger flows into the country. Other procedures under way include a MATRA—a multi-agency and risk assessment group—at each airport. I assure him that Liverpool has such a team, bringing together all the diverse players in the airport environment to put security at the very heart of what is done. Liverpool now has such a team in operation, and we believe that it will continue to enhance the security there; issues raised can be addressed through that group.

I shall write to the hon. Gentleman with more detail. I congratulate him on securing this debate; it is an important subject and he has raised it assiduously. He and I, as north-west MPs, are as one in wanting the highest standards of security at our regional airports.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 June 2005

[DEREK CONWAY *in the Chair*]

Coronary Heart Disease

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Coaker.]*

2.30 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Ms Rosie Winterton): It is apt that we are holding this debate during "Help a heart" week. My own week started at my gym in Doncaster on Monday, when I helped to launch the British Heart Foundation's drive to raise awareness of heart disease among women. I was pleased to encourage those who were taking part in the bike marathon—if not to take part myself. I was able to make the point that we must do more to raise awareness of heart disease among women. This debate is an excellent opportunity for me to repeat that message.

I am sure that all hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to the British Heart Foundation and all the other voluntary organisations that work tirelessly to provide information, research and support for cardiac patients. They have made, and continue to make, an invaluable contribution to the success of the national service framework for coronary heart disease.

Five years ago, we published the national service framework. We chose to make coronary heart disease one of our top priorities for very good reasons. It was the single biggest cause of death in the United Kingdom, killing more than 110,000 people in England in 1998, including more than 41,000 people under the age of 75. When we launched the NSF, there was little systematic primary care for those suffering from heart disease. There was little systematic cardiac rehabilitation. There was little systematic care for those suffering from heart failure.

Back then, seven out of every 10 accident and emergency departments were unable to give life-saving clot-busting drugs. Three quarters of patients dialling 999 for help did not get those drugs within the so-called "golden hour". Some cardiac care units would even refuse to treat patients over a certain age. Possibly worst of all, there were appallingly long waits. Patients could wait a whole year just to get a hospital appointment, a further year for diagnosis and up to a further two years to get treated.

The national director for heart disease, Dr. Roger Boyle, recalls the trepidation he felt on his appointment when he saw what was required. When we introduced the NSF for coronary heart disease, my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), the then Secretary of State for Health, wrote:

"The NHS of old will be unrecognisable by the time we have finished our ten year programme of modernisation. This Framework will transform the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of coronary heart disease. It will help professionals to give better, fairer and faster care everywhere, to everyone who needs it. We want a service that is amongst the best in the world. Our people deserve nothing less."

So here we are, halfway through our 10-year vision. Dr. Roger Boyle's progress report, "Leading the way", which was published in March this year, sets out the remarkable progress that we have made. We set a target to reduce mortality from heart disease and related diseases by 40 per cent. by 2010. The latest figures show that we have achieved a 27 per cent. reduction already. We are well on track to hit the target. Almost all people experiencing chest pain for the first time are seen by a specialist clinic within two weeks. Fifty-four per cent. of people having a heart attack are treated with clot-busting drugs within an hour of dialling 999, compared with just 24 per cent. when we started out. An extra 22,500 patients are treated within the "golden hour".

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): What is the national service framework target for offering rehabilitation to people who have been discharged from hospital after an acute event? What percentage of people leaving hospital after an acute event get that rehabilitation?

Ms Winterton: I was going to come to that later. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Healthcare Commission produced a report earlier this year that showed that there were problems in that area. The target is to offer cardiac rehabilitation to something like 85 per cent. of people discharged from hospital following a primary diagnosis of heart attack or after coronary revascularisation. That target has not been met yet. The aim is to achieve that over a period of 10 years, but more work needs to be done in that area. I will come back to that later.

Waits for outpatient appointments are down to an absolute maximum of 17 weeks. They will be no more than 13 weeks by the new year. Waits for a diagnostic angiogram are no more than six months for 95 per cent. of patients. Waits for bypass surgery or angioplasty, which were previously up to two years, are now less than three months. A national network of smoking cessation services has helped hundreds of thousands of people to give up, lowering smoking prevalence from 28 to 25 per cent. We estimate that about 2.5 million people in England are now protected with cholesterol-lowering drugs, compared with about 300,000 in 1997. Nearly 2 million children receive a free piece of fruit at every school day, setting them up with a healthy start in life.

Those improvements have happened because people in the NHS have made them happen. They have changed the way in which they work to deliver a better service to patients. Just the other week, I was in Manchester to open a new catheter laboratory, which is part of our investment in better and quicker diagnostic services. The Greater Manchester cardiac network has some excellent examples of new ways of working. For example, it is training generic cardiac cath lab staff, who can be from a number of professional backgrounds, including cardiac radiographers, cardiac physiologists, or cardiac nurses.

The result is that staff are not tied to a single part of the cath lab's work—they can cover more widely, work more efficiently and speed the patient's journey though the diagnostic process. We should take pride in those achievements. They have been made possible because the NSF was not just put together in Whitehall. It was developed as a collaborative process, bringing in key

[Ms Winterton]

stakeholders: people, including patients, who had been working with the problems, and who went back to the field to help to solve them.

The NSF was developed and is being implemented by the people who really understand the issues and are passionate about making things better for patients. The Government have played a vital part in that. Unprecedented and sustained investment has been one element of our success story: close to £750 million of public money for new and expanded specialist cardiac hospitals; 19 major capital developments in hospitals from Newcastle to Plymouth since 2000; and as much as £750 million a year on statins alone. On a smaller scale, money for public access defibrillators is also saving lives. There are 61 across the country so far and that is set to rise, with 3,000 further defibrillators being installed throughout England.

The critical thing is that the new money has not just brought "more of the same". The imagination and determination that the NHS has shown in implementing change has been extraordinary, and it has paid off. In 2002, more than 3,000 patients suffering from coronary heart disease were given a real choice about where they were treated. We have gone even further: now, all heart patients are being given a choice of which hospital they would like to be treated in, which is empowering patients and giving them more control over how the system treats them.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): I am interested in the issue of choice. The Minister said that all patients are now given a choice of at least two hospitals. In a county such as Cornwall, where there is just one major hospital, what does that choice mean in practice?

Ms Winterton: The choice means that patients will have the opportunity, if they so wish, to travel further afield. As I know from my constituency, there are people who sometimes wish to take up the options that are available if it means that they can have their operation more quickly. For some people, it may be more convenient to be treated elsewhere. That is the vision that we need to bear in mind for the future. If a person wishes to go to a different area of the country, perhaps to be near relatives, that choice should be available to them.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to have the specialisms in certain regional centres? For example, in the north-east, most of my constituents with coronary heart disease go to Middlesbrough, which is a considerable way from my constituency, but it is a centre of excellence to which people are willing to travel to get the best treatment available.

Ms Winterton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must bear in mind that the more that we consult with patients about how they wish their treatment to be provided, particularly patients with heart problems who have used services in certain areas, the more we are able to work with them, as we have tried to do in devising the sort of services that my hon. Friend described. People want the very best care and they understand the need for specialist centres in many of these areas. This is not about the NHS being in charge of the patient; it is about the patient being in charge of the NHS.

We have made cholesterol-lowering drugs available over the counter, giving patients increased power to make their own decisions. We have looked at new types of services, for example, rapid-access chest pain clinics, which are transforming the way in which patients are treated. For heart attacks, growing numbers of paramedics are taking clot-busting treatment to the patients, improving their chances of survival. We are in the middle of a pilot study to assess the viability of using angioplasty to unblock arteries as the emergency treatment of choice.

The quality of care experienced by patients undergoing heart surgery is improving. These days, surgeons are operating on patients who have a much higher risk of dying because they are older and more frail in many cases, but the proportion of patients who survive is growing. There has been a 30 per cent. drop in mortality for older people and the most ill, a 30 per cent. drop in mortality for women and a 50 per cent. fall for patients suffering from diabetes. More and more lives are being saved every day.

Five years ago, few people would have believed that we would come so far in just a short time. Aiming to go from an 18-month wait just for surgery to an 18-week wait all the way from GP to surgery would have been thought very optimistic, but we are now sitting down and creating credible and affordable plans to do just that. It will be a challenge, but we have much more to do to deliver cardiac services that fully meet the aspirations of patients, the public and professionals.

To return to the point made by the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison), some key areas were identified by the Healthcare Commission's report in March. We must see improvements in prevention, in care for heart failure patients and in rehabilitation. Heart disease is a chronic disease as well as an acute one, so we need to provide better care for the 900,000 people in Britain who are living with heart failure. We need to help people to manage their own condition as a routine part of their lives.

We need to be much more effective in the way in which we prevent heart disease. The public health White Paper "Choosing Health" sets out a radical new agenda for delivering that aim, looking at ways to give personalised, practical support to people to make healthier choices and to lead healthier lives. Health inequality will also be a critical challenge. To overcome the inequalities that still exist, we need much greater efforts in those areas that are hardest hit by disease—more effective prevention services, more identification and treatment of people who are at risk of disease and better rehabilitation.

Sheffield has shown how it can be done by delivering a tailored programme of support to 51 practices in the most deprived areas of the city. By 2003 in Sheffield, there had been a 23 per cent. fall in the mortality rate in the most deprived fifth of its population, compared to a 16 per cent. decline for the city as a whole.

We have come a long way in the past five years but that does not mean that we should slow down. When we wrote the national service framework five years ago, we had to make tough choices about priorities and what

was practicable at the time, so we concentrated primarily on disease in the arteries. The excellent progress that has been made in those areas has given us the scope to look for new areas in which to strive for the best.

That gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) for bringing the crucial issue of electrical disorders of the heart to the attention of the House and the Government. Arrhythmias, or irregular heartbeats, range from being a minor inconvenience to being potentially fatal. Sufferers can experience palpitations, dizziness or blackouts, which have a significant impact on the quality of their lives. When death occurs, it can be sudden and without warning. It can be visited on all ages, but it occurs predominantly in the young. However, there is a good deal that the NHS can do to tackle the problem, which is why we added a new chapter to the national service framework, following on from that successful campaign, to help to ensure that patients receive high-quality support, expert diagnosis, effective treatment and effective rehabilitation.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in putting on record our gratitude to Cardiac Risk in the Young, to the Arrhythmia Alliance and to STARS—the Syncope Trust and Reflex Anoxic Seizures—which helped to put together the new chapter. Thanks to their hard work, I am confident that in the years to come we will have as fine a story to tell on that chapter as we have for the first chapters of the NSF.

The far-reaching successes that we have had in improving the quality and timeliness of heart services show the true nature of the NHS, its fitness for purpose and its ability to meet raised expectations. The NSF has not been left to gather dust on Whitehall shelves, but been taken on and delivered on with enthusiasm. That has meant real results for patients. In 1997, the death rate for heart disease and stroke was about 140 per 100,000 of population. By 2003, that figure had been reduced to about 100 per 100,000—a reduction of more than a quarter. Thanks to the hard work of all involved, lives are being saved. Our task now is to ensure that we achieve as much in the next five years as we have in the five years since the NSF was written.

2.51 pm

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I welcome the latest addition to the NSF—chapter 8, on arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death. I have read it and it contains some fairly impenetrable bits, which I have highlighted but will not read out. Instead, I draw the Chamber's attention in particular to the table on page 10, which is masterful and will undoubtedly make a great contribution to those who are tasked with dealing with this difficult range of conditions. It is a good document and congratulations are due to all who were involved in producing it.

While I am in a congratulatory mood, I would also like to say a big "Well done" to all the health care staff and scientists who, in relation to coronary heart disease, have made such a big contribution to improved longevity since the 1970s. The Minister talked at length about the past five years, but our perspective should be longer than that. I was not impressed by the somewhat graceless introduction to the "Leading the Way" document published in March 2005, particularly the remarks by the then Secretary of State for Health. His comments implied several things, but the suggestion that 1997 or 1999 were year zeros was particularly unhelpful. We must appreciate that long-term trends have continued since 1997 and 1999—I shall explain how those trends have continued more or less unchanged during that time—so for the Government to take credit where credit is not due is wrong. I hope that they will have the humility to admit that much of the improvement achieved is owed to the efforts of others, in many cases international others, and not necessarily to the interventions of the British Government during that period.

We have dealt at length with high-tech medicine and what happens in hospitals, but it is important to note that in coronary heart disease much of the prognosis is due to what happens outside hospitals. In my intervention, I sought to press the Minister on rehabilitation services, about which I shall say more during my speech. First, I would like to take her back to the middle of last year, when the British Heart Foundation published a report suggesting that 60 per cent. of the improved mortality for coronary heart disease over the past two decades was attributable not to hospital intervention, but to the reduction of major risk factors. If we are serious about continuing to reduce coronary heart disease, we must focus on that. It is tempting to focus on the high-tech, the exciting and what goes on in hospitals, particularly tertiary centres—we all do it, but in truth we need to examine the factors that make it more likely for someone to have a cardiac event or, if they have a cardiac event, a bad one. Sixty per cent. of the improved mortality being due to the alleviation of remediable factors is a very impressive statistic, particularly in the context of the increase in obesity.

Mr. Kevan Jones: I agree with some of the points that the hon. Gentleman is making. In Durham, for example, local pharmacists are managing clot-busting drugs in the community, so that people no longer have to present at hospital to receive them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such schemes improve not only people's lives, but the effectiveness of the drugs?

Dr. Murrison: Yes, I think so. The other point that we need to make is that the Healthcare Commission is quite keen that we should take treatment closer to patients, and I entirely agree, whether we are talking about clot-busting drugs administered by paramedics or statins prescribed over the counter in pharmacies. That work has made a big contribution, which is all to the good, but we should bear it in mind that things could get worse.

The Select Committee on Health pointed out that the rising levels of obesity in this country might mean that our children and grandchildren have higher mortality from coronary heart disease than our own generation. That is of great concern. This country's rate of increase in obesity is matched only by Samoa and Kuwait—the situation is that bad. It is very important that when considering coronary heart disease Ministers focus on factors that are remediable. One of the biggest of those, literally and metaphorically, is obesity. It would be interesting to hear the Minister say how she thinks we might address that ticking time bomb, which looks as

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though it could make life expectancy, particularly in relation to coronary heart disease, worse for future generations in this country than it is for our own generation.

Let me take the Minister a little further back than 1997. A number of comments in "Leading the way—Progress report 2005" were disingenuous. The graphs printed in that report tell a good story. They are truncated graphs—by and large, they do not go much further back than the mid-1990s, or the early 1990s in some cases, and those that relate to treatment start from 2000. That is a pity, because if the graphs had gone back to the 1970s, we would have had a better idea of how trends that have continued during the past seven years were established in the 1970s, particularly those relating to life expectancy and improved mortality and morbidity from coronary heart disease. Page 8 of the report purports to show how mortality has fallen since 1996, but even that truncated graph shows that the trend had been going in that direction since at least 1993–94. The report does not give us information about the situation before then, but if we go back to primary sources, we find that mortality has been improving since the 1970s and that what we have seen more recently is a continuation of that trend. It is important to reflect that in such a report. On page 9 is the claim that health inequalities have narrowed over the past six years, when in fact the steepest decline happened in the late 1990s—in 1997–98. I do not think that the Minister would take credit for that. When we are considering such statistics and graphs, it is important that the words used to describe them are accurate. There are some misleading remarks in the report, which makes it an overly political document. That is a pity.

On page 10 are a couple of rather busy charts comparing how this country is doing with a range of other European countries, but again it is important to note that many of them are not really comparable to the UK. If we went out on the street and said to someone, "Would you compare the UK to Bulgaria, Hungary and the Russian Federation?", they would probably stand aghast. It is disingenuous to claim that we are approaching the mid-point of that range of European nations in terms of our experience in coronary heart disease. In fact, if we compare our experience with those of truly comparable countries, we are doing far less well—and we are not improving against those countries at all.

Of the countries in what we might call developed Europe, we are doing better than only Finland, which has its own problems, of which the Minister might be aware, and Ireland, so we cannot crow too much about how we are doing against international benchmarks. The claim that we are rapidly catching up is not borne out by the evidence, and to say that we are in the middle of the pack is a damning indictment if we are to include countries such as Bulgaria and Hungary, whose experience in coronary heart disease is disastrous. Countries such as Australia and Norway have bested us in terms of improvement in mortality. That is a pity, and we need to work out why that has happened. In celebrating the improvements achieved in this country, we must compare ourselves with countries that are truly comparable and work out why we have not done better. The Minister will hear that refrain from my colleagues and I rather a lot in the coming months, but when we are trying to determine how we are doing and how we might do better, it is important that we compare our experience with other truly comparable countries.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is discussing how we compare and to whom. Is it not also appropriate to compare in date order? From the late 1990s to today, premature deaths from heart-related diseases have fallen by 27 per cent. Surely it is appropriate also to speak about that figure and acknowledge its veracity.

Dr. Murrison: I thought that I did that when I said that I welcome the improvements that have been achieved. However, we cannot be complacent and we must compare ourselves with other countries. For example, we must accept that a working man in this country is twice as likely as a man in Italy to die from coronary heart disease. We have to ask ourselves why heart disease is a relative unknown in France compared with this country. There is a raft of reasons for that—we could think of one or two off the top of our heads. Nevertheless it is important that we compare our experience and how we are managing coronary heart disease and other conditions with comparable countries. We cannot simply say that our performance has improved by X per cent. over so many years, because to do so would be complacent. Of course we all expect improvements over the next 10, 20 and 30 years. We all anticipate that mortality and morbidity from common forms of disease will improve—we would be horrified if they did not, particularly given the amount of money that the Government have spent on the health service. The trick is to spend that money wisely and in the way that will get maximum benefit. At the moment, it looks as if we are not doing as well as we might compared with other countries. To say that we are doing well because we are approaching the mid-range of European countries is disingenuous if we are comparing ourselves with countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria and the Russian Federation. The man in the street would say that those are not comparable countries, and I would tend to agree.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with a lot of Conservatives who think that 1997 was year zero and that nothing happened before that? We had 18 years of a Government who did not give these issues the same high priority as the present Government. Does he have some comparable figures that say whether in the same period other countries have reduced deaths by 27 per cent., which is no mean achievement?

Dr. Murrison: Let me correct the hon. Gentleman. I did not say that 1997 was year zero; I said that that is the impression that one gets from the Government. The March report underscores that impression, because in the remarks that it makes and the statistics that it presents, it suggests strongly that everything good started in 1997—or, to be fair, 1999, when the Labour Government's spending plans kicked in, the first two years having been Conservative spending plans by design.

To answer the hon. Gentleman, yes we have those figures. They are readily available, and, if he remembers, I went to some lengths at the start to describe what has

happened since the mid-1970s—about the time that I went to medical school. Around that time, improvements in relation to common forms of disease, particularly coronary heart disease, became evident. We need to take a longer-term view and look back further than 1997 or 1999. The figures are commonly available, and I am sure the Library will be more than happy to provide the hon. Gentleman with them.

Ms Dari Taylor: The issue is so important that I do not like the idea of our bandying facts across the Chamber as though they were the central feature of the debate. I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider his comments well. The head of the cardiothoracic service at James Cook university hospital in Middlesbrough, has stated:

> "We have seen a huge improvement compared with the late 1990s when we had people dying on the waiting list. The system now has the extra capacity that we needed to do the job."

It is important that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that the Government have invested an enormous amount of resources and have prioritised. It would be foolish of him not to do so.

Dr. Murrison: The hon. Lady is being a little unfair. I started my remarks by being complimentary, in particular about the new chapter 8 on arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death, and I would be the first to acknowledge—as I have done—that there has been increased spending in the past seven years. It would be ridiculous if I did not do so. I am more than happy to say that and to welcome that. Of course there have been improvements; had there not been, I would be standing here laying into the Minister for not improving the health service given the money that she and her colleagues have spent on it. It is axiomatic that there have been improvements, and I am sure that the hon. Lady's colleagues who were in Parliament during the 1980s and 1990s would have had the good grace, looking back over comparable five-year periods, to say the same. The basis of my thesis is that, for many reasons, the improvements started in the mid-1970s and have continued since. Let us hope and pray that they continue for many years to come, whichever Government the country is fortunate or not to have.

Health inequalities are dear to the Minister's heart, and I am interested in them as well. I welcome the spearhead group heralded in the public health White Paper, and I have no doubt that it will achieve lots of good things. However, to introduce a slightly parochial note into my contribution, I observe that many of the Government's initiatives—the five-a-day initiative, the local exercise action plan, fruit in schools, free pedometers and so on—miss out one group of people in need: the rural poor. As the Minister knows—I have written to her about the issue and I have raised it in the House—in focusing our attention on the large areas that are seen to be in need, we run the risk of ignoring a small but significant population in rural areas that are otherwise held to be extremely prosperous, such as the one that I am fortunate enough to represent. If we continue to ignore the rural poor in such initiatives, we risk health inequalities opening up even more. As one who practised as a doctor before becoming an MP, I can say without a shadow of doubt that the most crashing poverty that I have seen has been in rural areas. I am reluctant to see those people slip back even further, so I will be interested to hear what the Minister says about how, in all the worthy initiatives aimed at reducing health inequalities, she will address those who stand a real risk of being forgotten.

I mentioned rehabilitation briefly in my intervention, and I was grateful for the Minister's response. However, we are at risk of being overwhelmed by high-tech hospital medicine, and doctors and politicians are at risk of forgetting what happens to people after they are discharged. I know from my own practice how easy it is for people who are discharged, having had their cardiac event and gone into hospital to get better, to be seen by the system as "sorted". Well, they are not, and so much can be done through rehabilitation to improve outcomes for people who have had an acute coronary event. It is clear from the Healthcare Commission's survey of patients published yesterday that there is some way to go. It said that 63 per cent. of patients did not get rehabilitation post-event, which is well short of national service framework targets.

Those who are Afro-Caribbean or Pakistani are in a worse position—the figures are 87 per cent. and 79 per cent. respectively If we are concerned about reducing health inequalities, those statistics must worry us a lot. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister in her winding-up speech how we are going to address that shortfall in rehabilitation, particularly in respect of ethnic minorities. Further more, older people and women are less likely to be offered rehabilitation. That is particularly relevant this week, with the British Heart Foundation's welcome campaign to improve heart health for women. Let me say how much I welcome the work of the British Heart Foundation, in particular the excellent work done by British Heart Foundation-sponsored nurses. I hope that the Minister, when formulating her plans for improving rehabilitation after coronary heart disease, will bear that work in mind and work on it so that we can improve services for people in the community.

We all accept that we need to bring services closer to patients, and the various reports point in that direction in relation to coronary heart disease, so I would like to promote the use of intermediate care services, particularly community hospitals, in the provision of some of that rehabilitative service. I hope that the Minister, in designing services for people after they leave hospital, will bear community hospitals in mind, because they have a contribution to make in rehabilitating people with coronary heart disease. In my area, I have experienced the problem of rehabilitation falling between two stools: the responsibility was imaginatively taken on board by a district council and now, hopefully, is being taken on by a primary care trust. However, it is worrying that such services are often not owned by anyone in particular. We need to ensure that rehabilitation is regarded an essential part of someone's management after an acute event, rather than a bolt-on added extra, as tends to be the case at present if the statistics in the reports are to be believed.

In the context of women's health, we need to worry that in the youngest age group—16 to 19-year-olds—29 per cent. of women smoke, compared with 22 per cent. of men. In the remaining age groups, the reverse tends to be the case, but in that very young group there is a problem among women. This week, because of the

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British Heart Foundation's campaign, it is useful to consider how we can turn that situation round, given the need to focus on preventive factors in reducing mortality from coronary heart disease. We also know from the Healthcare Commission report that women are less likely to be referred for cardiac rehabilitation, less likely to join a scheme and, having joined it, more likely to drop out of it. That is worrying, and it will be interesting to find out from the Minister how she thinks that we can improve that situation.

Let me make a few points, in no particular order, on which I hope the Minister will respond. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) bravely undertook CT scanning by a company called Lifesyne on Victoria street, which involved his having a CT scan of his heart. We all went along too, and it was very jolly. Such scanning is state of the art and is not something that I would necessarily ask the Minister to incorporate into the NHS. However, on a more prosaic level, may I ask whether she will place more emphasis on scanning for aortic aneurism? That is a particular problem, which is relevant in the context of today's debate because we are discussing cardiovascular disease. It is a major cause of avoidable mortality and morbidity, particularly among certain ethnic groups. I am afraid that the subject is continuing to be neglected, and it would be useful to hear how the Minister thinks that the position might be improved.

It would also be interesting to know what discussion the Minister has had with her colleagues on the illegal importation of cigarettes. That is a particular problem in relation to young people and those on low incomes. In the context of health inequalities, the latter group is particularly important. If we were to walk a couple of hundred yards down the street, over Westminster bridge, I have no doubt that we would find someone selling some of those products. It seems ironic that that practice is going on so close to this place and it would be useful to hear how the Minister is tackling the importation of such products, which harm so many people on low incomes.

Finally, I ask the Minister what she is doing to improve the reluctance of many primary care physicians to incorporate innovation into their practice. We have seen in the press recently that our practitioners tend to operate conservatively—I use the word with a small C—in comparison with their international colleagues. It seems that we have some way to go to incorporate innovations into primary care practice in this country. Although the annual increase of 30 per cent. in the use of statins, for example, is very welcome, one wonders whether many such innovations could be incorporated more rapidly into routine primary care in this country. We need to decide why we tend to be fairly conservative in our primary care in this country compared with other countries.

3.16 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. I believe—as I am sure does everyone in the House—that coronary heart disease remains one of the most serious medical problems for us to cope with and to produce medical and lifestyle responses to.

I listened to the Minister's speech with care and was delighted to hear her say that she had been down to the gym this week, the outcome of which was positive. I also went to the gym this week, but the outcome was not particularly positive. I tried to register and the young person behind the desk gave me a booklet on lifestyles and said, "Come back next week and maybe we will discuss how and in what way we can put you right." I felt thoroughly uncomfortable about that response, but I intend to take her up on the offer.

The Minister also said that she was very pleased with the involvement of charities and voluntary bodies, adding that they were positive and persuasive in their involvement in this area of work. I should like to echo that statement, and make it clear that my involvement in this area has not come from anything particularly personal. It has come from my involvement in the issue of cardiac risk in the young—a valuable experience.

I want to start by referring to and quoting from reports from local clinicians in my constituency. I used part of one of the quotes earlier, but the quote is so worth while that I should like to return to it. The local head of cardiothoracic services at James Cook university hospital, Dr. Jim Hall, made it clear to all of us that there has been a huge improvement in the work of cardiac specialists since the late 1990s. I have not gone into the detail this time, but he ended by stating:

> "The system now has the extra capacity that we needed to do the job . . . We now have a full complement of highly-trained staff, which allows us to treat more people, more quickly."

This was responded to by Dr. Roger Boyle, the National Director for Heart Disease, who said that James Cook university hospital was a flagship centre for cardiac treatment, and that it was

> "probably the most efficient unit in the country and the sort of model we would like others to build for their own services."

I am delighted to hear that. Those are confident statements about a locality that invariably in the past failed to attract sufficient clinicians. We had serious problems, but now we are developing medical models. That is not just down to the fact that we as a Government are investing—which we are—but down to the fact that we have some excellent clinicians who are developing good services creatively.

James Cook hospital handles over 6,500 patients a year—that is a phenomenal number—for my constituency and for others on the Tees. Many people in my area live lives that are stressed, just like my own, and have lifestyles that they would like to improve; many live in multi-deprivation situations. The fact that they have such an incredibly valuable and excellent cardiothoracic service is very important to us all.

As many in the House today know, my interest in heart diseases began in a personal way: the tragic death of a close family friend's son. Levon Morland was 22 years old and died in his sleep. He was diagnosed as suffering from Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome. He was an active, fit, young man who lived life to the full. He believed his consultant, who said to him, "Your condition is a bit of nuisance. Get on with your life." He now has no life to get on with. His death was not just tragic, it was shocking. That shock was added to by the fact that Levon was not the only 22-year-old to suffer from a potentially fatal heart condition, which, frankly,

appeared to be unacknowledged by the medical profession. I was dismayed when I started to look at the research into the area to find that four, and possibly eight, young people die a week from a heart condition that can regularly be diagnosed and treated. Those young people are invariably in their late teens and early 20s, and are always under 35. So, eight young people who are under 35 and are often in their late teens are dying every week from a condition that medics could understand, explain and prescribe for.

That shocking statistic was compounded for me by the fact that some of those people had been diagnosed with a serious heart condition, but had not received appropriate treatment. Some had shown symptoms of potential heart problems, such as breathlessness disproportionate to action, but had still been told that they were possibly suffering from stress or asthma. Some had witnessed the sudden death of a relative, genetically related, but had failed to receive any medical treatment that could have put their minds at rest. A screening process could have put their minds at rest about death not occurring due to an inherited condition. Such a service was not available, even though symptoms are so well documented.

It is also the case that when sudden death occurs, the pathology states that it is probably due to heart disease, but there is no defined cause or analysis referring to potential genetic consequences. There is no follow-up with relatives, who could inherit the disease.

Mr. Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that large numbers of deaths go unrecorded because they occur, for example, in swimming pools and are recorded as drownings? Documented cases suggest that a lot of young people are dying of sudden cardiac arrest.

Ms Taylor: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is also well documented, and the factual evidence is well produced. All of us, including me, have always put the medical profession on a high and wanted to respect it; indeed, we do respect it. However, reading this research, I started to feel more than uncomfortable about how young people were simply not accorded the medical seriousness that they deserved.

The death of my close friend, a man of 22, followed by my coming fifth in the ballot for private Members' Bills, catapulted me into the world of cardiac diseases, especially those affecting young people. Two years ago, I took the decision to use my private Member's Bill opportunity to table the Cardiac Risk in the Young (Screening) Bill. That was my clear approach to ensure that we aired, understood and used the available information to bring the Department of Health's attention, and that of the medical profession, to this serious problem. After one or two battles, the Department of Health—particularly Dr. Roger Boyle—was very supportive. Eventually, I withdrew that Bill, on the clear basis that a national service framework into arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death would be written. I am most grateful that it has now been written.

I was delighted that a national service framework was to be written, primarily because of the figure that I have already stated. We have looked at the information since the late 1990s and have seen a blueprint, or medical model, that people can use and perceive to be valuable for diagnosis and for determining prognosis. I believed that such an NSF for cardiac risk in the young was appropriate, and the new chapter of the NSF on arrhythmia and sudden cardiac death was launched. I was pleased, as was Cardiac Risk in the Young. I shall not labour the point, but hundreds of parents out there are delighted that a politician with no medical background whatever had the support and the determination to bring the issue to the House. They are delighted that an NSF has been launched; they understood its veracity.

Dr. Sharma from the CRY charity gave excellent support. I was delighted that he was part of the group who wrote the NSF chapter. Sometimes, all of us have to be exposed to areas that we do not know much about and this was the case for me. I felt at one stage that I was going through a mini-degree in medicine and, as a mere social scientist, that was one serious battleground. Nevertheless, I am grateful for all the support, and am delighted that the NSF has now been written.

The framework contains statements about which CRY has been lobbying for a long time. The NSF says:

> "People with arrhythmias should receive timely and high quality support and information, based on an assessment of their needs"

by an appropriate clinician. That is now guaranteed through the NSF. It also says:

> "When sudden cardiac death occurs, NHS services should have systems in place to identify family members at risk and provide personally tailored, sensitive and expert support, diagnosis, treatment and advice to close relatives."

That is so valuable.

The NSF also states that although people may want to say that they are merely suffering from breathlessness,

> "sustained palpitations and/or blackouts and/or unexplained impaired consciousness"

will not be ignored or sidelined as stress. Medics will always take such symptoms seriously, and the evaluation of families who may have inherited diseases will also be brought centre stage into medical diagnosis.

I am very grateful to the Department of Health, and to Dr. Roger Boyle in particular, as well as many others around Great Britain, for making cardiac risk in the young a recognised heart disease through the NSF. The NSF provides a blueprint that will prevent fatalities. That approach—national standards, key interventions, sets of measurable goals—is very valuable, and is beginning to state how people will be treated.

We shall be watching for progress. I will want to know that four or eight young people under the age of 35 are not dying every week from sudden cardiac death when symptoms have been ignored. I will want to know that the medical profession has acknowledged such symptoms and has done all that it can to prevent them from causing a fatality.

There is always a "but", and I have come to it. The framework is an excellent way forward, but I have some serious concerns—again, they come from cardiac specialists—to put to the Minister. I hope that she will acknowledge them and, over time, find a resolution to them. There is a national shortage of electrophysiologists—we have only 64 nationally—and they play a crucial part in diagnosis. There is also a shortage of back-up infrastructure. We have too few cardiophysiologists—the people who work on the

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management of cardiac devices—and too few specialist nurses to provide the patient support and explanation that is crucial if the NSF is to show an appropriate understanding of the disease.

Finally, cardiac risk in the young has been a poor relation for a long time. If the NSF is to be implemented, that specialism has to be specifically promoted. I hope that the Minister will reassure me that she is well aware of the concerns that I have outlined, and that they are being addressed.

I am pleased to be here today, and I am very pleased that the new chapter to the national service framework on arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death has been launched. It was well overdue, and it is excellent to know that it is in place. I am absolutely delighted that it acknowledges emphatically that one does not have to be over 50, or overweight, or to smoke cigarettes, to have a heart problem; fatalities can occur among fit, athletic and healthy young people in their early 20s.

3.32 pm

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): As a social scientist, it is a pleasure to follow another. More important, it is a pleasure to follow an hon. Member who is acknowledged across the House as having acquired a great deal of expertise in this area. Those of us who are not currently Ministers know how difficult it is to point to something that we have achieved, so I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) for her work, and congratulate her on the demonstrable achievement of the addition of a chapter to the national service framework. I am sure that all hon. Members received postcards from Cardiac Risk in the Young, and it is good to see all that work coming to fruition.

It is always important to salute progress and achievements, and we all welcome the existence of the NSF and its focus on a number of aspects of coronary heart disease. The reduction in mortality rates—27 per cent. over about half the period for which the target is 40 per cent.—is clearly welcome. All my remarks should be set in that context. I also welcome some of the successes that the Minister has trumpeted. The administration of drugs within the so-called golden hour, and the reductions in the more extreme waiting times for heart surgery are clearly welcome, although I notice that average waiting times have started to drift up. Presumably, that is a corollary of tackling the extreme cases—there must be some trade-off—but overall it is good news.

However, the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) is right to mention the "what if?" question and the "what are we comparing that with?" question. It seems that, before the NSF came into force, the number of fatalities from coronary heart disease was falling. Therefore, the chances are, although we cannot know what would have happened, that some of the improvement would have occurred anyway, as he said. It is important not to overstate the impact of interventions. We need to be sober about it and to consider the important comparative data. May I say very gently that I assumed that, after she understandably saluted the progress, the Minister would admit honestly to any omissions and problems, but she sat down. Justice was not done to the big problem areas. Some of them have been touched on in the debate, and I should like to flag up some others.

For example, one would not have thought from the Minister's speech that—I quote from the King's Fund:

> "When compared to Western European countries with comparable economies and levels of development, the United Kingdom still has the worst mortality rates"

for coronary heart disease. Obviously, one can spin numbers in all manner of ways, but the brute fact is that we have an awfully long way to go. As the hon. Member for Westbury said, we would not dream of having health outcomes as poor as those of some countries, so comparing ourselves with those countries does not help us to make a sober assessment of what has been done. There is a danger that we might get carried away. It is worth keeping the context in mind.

The national service framework is supposed to deal with a range of things—prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation. There has been a lot of focus on the fall in mortality rates but we are not making enough progress in other areas, and prevention is an important one. I imagine that, if I were a Minister at the Department of Health, I would spend most of my time thinking about the national health service, because that is the lever that can most readily be pulled. Prevention is a lot more difficult.

I occasionally wonder about the charts in reports that show, for example, the prescription of statins rising exponentially. On one level, if that is producing favourable outcomes, I think, "Great". But then I wonder how high the graph should go. Do we want people to need such drugs at an increasing rate? Do we want to keep trying to catch up, or do we want a Minister to stand up in the House of Commons one day and say, "I am delighted to say that fewer of these drugs had to be prescribed this year because they were not needed"? I do not say that such drugs have not made an important contribution, or that it is not important for them to be available, but in the long term prevention should be our starting point.

The evidence is rather mixed. The King's Fund, assessing the coronary heart disease NSF, says that progress on prevention

> "has been mixed—smoking rates are slowly coming down, but fruit and vegetable consumption has not improved and rates of obesity are rising."

I should be interested if the Minister said a little more about that, because she did not say much about obesity. Where is the Government's strategy up to? How long has it been in place? Are there any early signs of progress? Obesity is an issue across the developed world, but things are going in the wrong direction. Are we storing up problems for ourselves further down the track? I shall be grateful for her comments.

There are concerns that, although mortality rates are improving, prevention is looking less good. This year, the King's Fund published survey evidence on the prevalence of coronary heart disease—how many people have it now. That shows the numbers going in the wrong direction. The King's Fund cites the health survey for England of 2003, which shows an increase in the prevalence of coronary heart disease in both men and women in 1994, 1998 and 2003.

One would not have expected that after listening to the Minister's description of how wonderful the last five years have been. One would not have thought that coronary heart disease became more prevalent between 1998 and 2003. Again, I should be interested in the Minister's reflections on that. If fewer people died during that period, that is great, but what is coming down the track? How confident can we be that, with dietary problems and the growing prevalence of the disease, the improvements in mortality rates might not slow but, ultimately, reverse?

The second omission from what the Minister said, although it was clearly present in the contribution of the hon. Member for Westbury, was rehabilitation. Yesterday, the Healthcare Commission published evidence on the subject, of which I am sure the Minister is well aware. That indicates some real problems. People are not necessarily being shoved out of the hospital door, but they are being discharged without adequate preparation or advice, and they are having to come back in—no doubt they count as extra treatments and so boost the performance figures. That is not what we want.

When we talk about giving advice about lifestyle, smoking, diet and so on, it can sound like nannying, but if I had a heart attack, I would want to know whether it was sensible for me to take active exercise, regular exercise or a bit of mild exercise, whether there were things that I should stop eating and whether it mattered that I smoked once a day. There are lots of things that I would want to know. I would not necessarily want someone telling me what to do, but I would want advice, and that is clearly lacking.

The survey evidence produced by the Healthcare Commission yesterday was based on 4,000 heart patients who have attended NHS trusts across England, so it is clearly a substantive and serious piece of work. The survey states:

"Many patients reported that they are still leaving hospital without receiving basic advice about diet and exercise."

Even when cardiac rehabilitation programmes were available, take-up was

"lower than might be expected, even in 'priority groups' such as people who have had heart attacks."

Not only people who attended hospital with a mild condition, but people who had heart attacks were still not taking part in the programmes. Of those who took part in the survey, nearly two thirds did not take part in a cardiac rehabilitation programme, and that even included people more seriously affected. On the theme of prevention, more than a third of those surveyed were not told about physical activity that would help them with their condition.

Anna Walker, chief executive of the Healthcare Commission, makes a much more balanced assessment of the situation than the Minister. She welcomes the progress that is being made, but wants to see

"immediate improvements in access to cardiac rehabilitation services."

That is not something for a 10-year framework—it needs to be done now. She wants to ensure that advice on

"lifestyle changes . . . is given to all patients"—

not 37 per cent. of them, or whatever the figure is—

"before being discharged from hospital."

Ms Dari Taylor: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman carefully and I think that he is making lots of statements that are half right and half wrong. The reality that we must all cope with is ensuring that we are able to employ sufficient numbers of the right people with the right qualifications. We regularly find that in hospitals and educational establishments there is a demand and finance, but that the training of people is slow to catch up. Does he acknowledge that much of the system is in place but that, if we do not carry it through over a period of three or 10 years, we will not match people's expectations because, frankly, we will not employ the appropriate people?

Steve Webb: If the chief executive of the Healthcare Commission, who I would defer to for expertise on such matters—I do not know whether the hon. Lady would—had said at the start of the national service framework that she wanted everything done tomorrow, I would accept the hon. Lady's point. However, she is saying that halfway through the process there is an extraordinarily low take-up of rehabilitation services. I would have thought that five years was enough time to train people. Part of the problem is not training but systems. If I am discharged from hospital having had a heart attack, there should automatically be someone sitting down with me and talking me through exercise, diet and everything else.

A lot of the advice is described in the survey as basic. I do not imagine that it takes a huge amount of time to train people who are already medics to give basic advice on diet and exercise after heart problems. The chief executive of the Healthcare Commission is unlikely to make irrational and implausible demands. She is saying that the system could and should already be in place with the resources available now. As the hon. Member for Westbury said, that aspect of the process is not necessarily the most glamorous but it is vital. To put in context what the Healthcare Commission is saying about its importance, the chief executive says that

"further progress towards European standards will be hampered if access to rehabilitation, advice before discharge and routine follow-up care are not addressed."

I want to touch on one more issue before drawing my remarks to a close, and that is the subject of health inequalities. I was interested in the example that the Minister gave from Sheffield, and I was encouraged that additional interventions in deprived areas can produce above-average results, which must be a good thing. Five years through the process, how near are we to nationwide action on health inequalities? Pilots and localised studies are great, but have we closed the gaps in inequality between socio-economic and ethnic groups that were flagged up at the start of the process? I appreciate that such data is always out of date and that there is always a dirty great lag before we know anything, but is there anything at all that we can tell? Is there any early information? Is health inequality rising or falling in the field of coronary heart disease, or is it too soon to say? I hope that the Minister will address those questions.

If one is selective about the national service framework, one can tell a good story. The Minister, with her customary charm, told a good story. It sounded good as far as it went, although it overstated where we are in comparison with what might have happened

[Steve Webb]

regardless. Progress has been made and we should salute those in the national health service and in the charitable sector who have helped to make it happen—the British Heart Foundation and others must be acknowledged. This is not something that I often say, but it worried me when the Minister stopped talking because she felt that she had said everything that there was to say. When she speaks again later, I hope that she will say a lot more about what she did not talk about, about areas in which progress is not being made, and about what is coming down the track. If the incidence of coronary heart diseases is rising and diet and obesity trends are moving in the wrong direction, are we not storing up a lot of trouble for ourselves? Does not more emphasis have to be put on effective preventative action and rehabilitation?

3.46 pm

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I say how glad I am that this debate is being held? It was programmed for the dying days of the previous Parliament and had to be withdrawn, but it is important that the issues raised by Members about how to make progress in the future are heard. There are clear problems with how to organise the health service but at the end of the day, the fundamental issue is money. Investment in the health service came up as an issue during the general election campaign, and the Government are clearly achieving results of which we can be proud.

The reduction of 27 per cent. mentioned earlier is no mean achievement and represents about 25,000 lives saved. Anyone who has had a family member die from a heart attack will know that it is a sudden and tragic way of losing someone and that it affects not only the person who died but the remaining family members. Likewise, people who have suffered from, or whose family members have suffered from, coronary heart disease will know the poor quality of life that that leads to.

The use of clot-busting drugs, which has increased by only 25 per cent. since 2000, is making a real difference. I referred earlier to an experiment in my constituency in which pharmacists are helping to dispense such drugs. That is a new way to ensure that individuals that need them get clot-busting drugs, and it makes a real difference.

Reference has also been made to prevention, which is important. I am glad to hear that the Minister was exercising this morning, and I look forward to seeing you, Mr. Conway, next Tuesday at WeightWatchers. If I do not see you there, I will ring Mrs. Conway to see if she can persuade you to attend.

The policy that we have put in place for primary care trusts has a key part to play in reducing coronary heart disease, because PCTs are addressing prevention and trying to ensure, certainly in my constituency, that changes are made in people's diets and lifestyles.

I want, in my brief speech, to mention the chapter on cardiac risk in the young. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on cardiac risk in the young. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) pointed out today that some 400 young adults a year suffer sudden cardiac death. I spoke earlier about the tragic consequences of sudden death. It is terrible when it happens to older people, but there is nothing one can say to families after the sudden death of fit, healthy young people, such as those whom I have met through my work on cardiac risk in the young. One cannot put oneself in the shoes of people who have lost a healthy child who was in the prime of their life.

I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South, became involved in this area of work through the death of Levon Morland, who was a family friend of mine, too. He was a healthy, fit young man who was, sadly, taken from his family. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for introducing a private Member's Bill, the Cardiac Risk in the Young (Screening) Bill, during the previous Parliament. She withdrew it, following the Government's commitment to include the chapter in question. That is a good example of the way in which Back Benchers can make a difference. As someone who also piloted a private Member's Bill through the House last year, I encourage any new Member to enter the ballot and to consider how to make such a difference. The hard work that my hon. Friend did will pay dividends.

I pay tribute, also, to the Minister at the time in question, Melanie Johnson, who unfortunately lost her seat at the general election. She gave a commitment to take the matter seriously, without which the chapter would not have been included.

The Cardiac Risk in the Young (Screening) Bill received cross-party support, and the all-party group also has such support. We grew, after the debate, from a membership of seven to more than 55. We have our annual reception on the Terrace next Wednesday, and hon. Members are welcome to attend. I am pleased that the Minister has agreed to speak at the reception to highlight this important issue.

The national framework is important, and this is the first time that the issue of cardiac risk in the young has been included in it. It will lead to improvements relating to the setting out of treatments for cardiac arrhythmias. My comments relate to the young in particular, but older people can be affected as well, as we all know from the example of the Prime Minister. The condition is also, I am told, the cause of a third of strokes.

I pay tribute, among those who worked on the chapter, to Roger Boyle, who met the group and took the matter seriously. I think that his commitment was welcomed by the families involved and by the Members of Parliament who came to listen to him address the group. I have said before that I pay tribute to Alison Cox, the chief executive of CRY, who makes my life a misery at times by badgering me to do things about cardiac risk in the young. She is truly committed to the work, and should receive recognition. Dr. Sanjay Sharma has also raised the issue.

Now that the chapter has been included in the document, a key issue is genetic inheritance and whether the conditions in question run in families. There is a large body of evidence that they do. More research needs to be done, because we all know that if the conditions are detected early enough in young people the tragic consequences that affect many families can be avoided. That knowledge, and the progress report, "Leading the Way", give encouragement to many campaigning families who have been working hard.

I want to finish with a couple of pleas to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South about the way in which we evaluate the chapter. It should not be treated as a rigid piece of work, but should be examined in the near future for ways in which we could improve it. Alongside that—CRY is working hard on this—we need to raise awareness of cardiac risk in the young among GPs in particular, and among others who deal with young people, such as teachers and youth workers. If the Government helped with the promotion of such work that would be important.

I do not ask for blanket screening of young people, which would be ineffective, but I am interested in whether it could be available in the future for young people who take part in sport in particular. In other countries, such as the United States, people must be tested for heart conditions before they take part in certain competitive sports. We need to consider whether we could introduce that practice.

I raised a point about coroners—something slightly outside the Minister's area—in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South. I know that we are expecting a new coroners Bill. However, coroners need to take seriously the possibility that certain accidents, especially drownings, could be linked to sudden cardiac events, especially in young people. Too often coroners dismiss as drowning, among other things, events that could be sudden cardiac death. That is important, because if we are to improve the situation it is vital to get the statistics right, and to know how many people are dying of such conditions. CRY may well raise that issue in relation to the coroners Bill, but perhaps the Minister could pass on my concerns.

I welcome the advances that have been made; the Government can be proud of what they have done. It is nice that my hon. Friend's Bill has led to a change which, if implemented, will save young lives.

3.57 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): Obesity, exercise, WeightWatchers and gyms have been mentioned several times. I admit that I have not been near a gym recently, but for those of us who are slightly older the best exercise is having an office at least a quarter of a mile from the Lobbies. I am thinking of doing a survey of obesity in hon. Members related to the distance of their offices from the Chamber.

I am delighted to speak in the debate, and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor); there is a lot in what she was saying, just as I arrived in the Chamber, about keeping on jumping up and down and shouting. I am very pleased to see the Minister; she gives some stability to the health team, which is entirely new except for her and Lord Warner, who has moved up to become Minister of State.

As to the extra chapter of the national service framework, I am delighted that the need for quality standards in the treatment of arrythmias has been recognised. Arrythmias were a relatively new subspecialty 10 to 15 years ago. Although the Minister was rather dismissive of everything that happened more than five years ago, many good things did happen then. The NHS was not quite such a political football.

I remember drugs called ACE inhibitors coming out in the 1980s and revolutionising the treatment of heart failure. The first person I gave them to was an elderly widow who had retired to my town to die of heart failure. I started her on one of those drugs in a very cautious way. I did not reckon to follow her up because I thought that the outlook was hopeless. Six months later her doctor said, "You'd better see her again; she's going out doing the shopping." That was dramatic.

Clot-busters, which have been mentioned, also came into use in the late 1980s. I hate to rub a sore point for the Minister, but the hospital at which I worked, which no longer sees acute patients, had the door-to-needle time down to nine minutes for clot-busters before, sadly, it lost those services.

Speaking of arrhythmias, treatment has been absolutely revolutionised in the past few years. When I retired, there were few specialists in arrhythmia treatment; now, thank goodness, there are more of them. There are more opportunities for people to be treated and to have abative operations that actually cure some of the serious arrhythmias. There are more opportunities for screening and for interpreting electrocardiograms and the relatively small changes that can herald danger. There is also more widespread use of echocardiograms, which can pick up and measure things such as aortic aneurisms and detect some of the potentially dangerous problems that affect young people. I therefore welcome the quality requirements, which imply that the aim is to make such specialist treatments available to everybody.

I do not want us to forget the first few chapters of the national service framework. Enough has been said about the Healthcare Commission report and about the fact that some very ordinary things still need addressing. The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) was absolutely correct that systems must be in place when someone who has had a heart attack is discharged. We must make sure that they do not slip through without being put on an exercise programme, a programme to help them stop smoking or a weight-loss programme.

The second issue emphasised in the present chapter is, of course, sudden cardiac death. We must not forget that most cases occur in people suffering from coronary heart disease and involve the sudden arrhythmia or the sudden acute coronary. Obviously, such things will be addressed by better prevention and the better treatment of coronary heart disease and its complications, the arrhythmias. That leaves us with the most distressing issue of all: the sudden, unexpected death of young people. So often, these deaths remain unexplained, and all credit must go to the voluntary groups that have pushed this issue and produced the present chapter of the national service framework.

I come now to the difficult part of my contribution. I do not want to be seen to be undermining the present efforts in any way, because they are absolutely tremendous. However, they raise the question of whether health care prioritisation—I am specifically avoiding the word "rationing"—should be local or central. When the Select Committee on Health carried out its inquiry into the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, we unearthed all sorts of problems. NICE is the first worthwhile, commendable attempt at some sort of health care prioritisation, but we came across NICE blight. As soon as something went to NICE, doctors felt that they could not prescribe it until it had been recommended.

[Dr. Richard Taylor]

Sometimes NICE recommendations went against local priorities. Let me quote a witness from a major teaching hospital not very far from here, who was speaking just after NICE had recommended implantable cardiac defibrillators:

"four implantable cardiac defibrillators cost £120,000 and for that same amount of money you could have funded four extra nurses . . . the nurses we could put into accident and emergency very directly stack up against some of the things which NICE have funded. When NICE says yes and it is mandatory, it deprives our local residents of the chance of getting core and basic services."

So there is a way in which NICE recommendations could obscure local priorities.

I am also slightly worried about NSFs. They are mandatory, but they do not exist for many serious illnesses. Are those illnesses disadvantaged? When the Select Committee conducted its sexual health report, we found that under-provision of sexual health services was a tremendously widespread, serious problem. I know that the Government have gone part way to help deal with it by providing extra money, but we wondered whether a national service framework would help. We were told that it would take an awfully long time to get one worked out and that there would probably be no more NSFs in any case. Have the people working on arrhythmias discovered the way round the need for a new NSF? Is the answer to aim for a new chapter to an existing NSF? I am thinking particularly of the NSF for long-term conditions, which concentrates nearly entirely on neurological conditions, but there are so many other chronic disabling conditions, such as the chronic rheumatic disorders. If I organised a powerful voice, as the hon. Member for Stockton, South did, could we get an extra chapter added to that NSF to give it much more strength?

I want now to talk a little about actual suffering and about families who are so suddenly and unexpectedly bereaved. Suffering cannot be measured. There are some awfully trite quotes about how good it is to suffer and how suffering does people such good; they make one absolutely squirm. Wordsworth had it absolutely right when he said that "Action is transitory" and that

"Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,

And shares the nature of infinity."

So one cannot measure suffering. How do we compare the suffering of a family who has suddenly and unexpectedly lost a perfectly fit teenager with the suffering of a family who is told that their four-year-old son—a delightful, bright kid—has got Duchenne muscular dystrophy? They know that they will see him slowly deteriorate over the next 10 or 15 years and that he will almost certainly die in his teens. How do we prioritise such suffering? I understand that there is the possibility of genetic treatment for that sort of muscular dystrophy and that it could offer a cure. A constituent recently wrote to me, saying that we need an extra £5 million for the research, which could produce a cure for their son before it is too late.

There are so many competing claims for funds. The hon. Member for Stockton, South implied that improving the care for such young people is not as simple as raising awareness or teaching people, including doctors and nurses, about the risks. It also requires a tremendous amount of investment in new physiologists, new arrhythmia experts and new specialist nurses. I have letters from radiotherapists telling me that there is apparently an absolutely dramatic new form of radiotherapy, which is available in only one centre in this country. It produces high rates of cure, with little risk of damage or morbidity, but those who wrote to me forecast that patients will soon be going abroad for treatment because there is only the one centre in this country and it is unlikely to be given sufficient priority.

To return briefly to the Select Committee's report on NICE, one of the final recommendations contained these words:

"Prioritisation of healthcare spending is an issue of overwhelming importance, and during the course of this inquiry it has become clear to us that a more open debate on healthcare prioritisation needs to take place."

In their response, the Government point out the huge difficulties that that entails across the whole field of health care, concluding:

"Achieving a comprehensive, empirically-based framework could therefore only be achieved in the long-term."

All we are asking for is the beginning of a debate on prioritisation, so that it is not just groups that happen to have clout and a loud voice that can achieve such dramatic breakthroughs.

Ms Dari Taylor: I have no problems when the Welsh are playing rugby; I can shout as loud as anybody. However, although I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, the issue is not only about having a loud voice, but about unnecessary death and tragedies that could be prevented. I would appreciate it if, in saying the one, the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge the other.

Dr. Taylor: Of course I acknowledge that, but there are other causes of preventable death—indeed, one on which we are awaiting a reply from the Government is venous thromboembolism in hospitalised patients.

To conclude, I return to these fearfully sad problems. I am not quite sure how much can be done to pick up the totally symptomless individual, with no family history or any other reason to have a medical examination, ECG or echo. However, there is every case for better education of all health care professionals, so that if people happen to have ECGs showing minor changes, those can be picked up. Also, the availability of screening for members of the family is drastically important, because it is too awful for one member of the family to have something, but for the others not to be followed up on.

Finally, the last quality requirement in the chapter, on sudden cardiac death, refers to the post-mortem, which other hon. Members have mentioned. Picking up the signs that might be there in such post-mortems is extremely difficult. I am therefore delighted to see that a standard post-mortem, looking for the commonest causes of premature sudden death, has been drawn up by the Royal College of Pathologists. I hope that we will see improvements in the coming years.

4.12 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to listen to a speech by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), a practitioner who brings such experience to the House, but he has worried me slightly. Today I scored what I thought was a minor triumph—life as a Back Bencher is not full of triumphs—which is that I persuaded the accommodation Whip to relocate me from Norman Shaw North, which as hon. Members know is the farthest point from the Chamber, to a room in this building. If there is a correlation between overweight MPs and the distance that one has to travel, I am now rather concerned that my weight is about to increase substantially and that my minor triumph will turn out to be a disaster.

To reflect on personal matters for a moment longer, my family lived partly in the shadow of a serious heart attack that my father suffered when he was 47. He has had five more but is still alive at 78, which is a remarkable tribute to the skill of the practitioners and the available medicines. He is still around, and so alert and interested in politics, which sometimes means that I do not have so many minor triumphs, especially when he is on the phone complaining about the last thing that I have said. My family's experience of living in the shadow of cardiac arrest led me to reflect that I might have a genetic propensity to the same kind of problem. However, when reading about coronary heart disease, I made the pleasurable discovery that it might be possible to change my behaviour and thus counter the genetic factors. I therefore decided to try not to put on too much weight. I exercise almost every day—for five or six hours at weekends—and have done ever since my father's first heart attack.

Ms Dari Taylor: Pushing a hoover around?

Jon Trickett: I do not push a hoover around too much—hoovering certainly does not take five hours, anyway.

Most hon. Members have mentioned inequality, and I represent one of the illest populations in the country. A number of measures are used, some of which can baffle the non-statistician and non-medical practitioner, but by whichever measure one chooses, the communities of former mining areas, such as the one that I represent, are extremely sick. For example, the crude death rate in England is 990 for every 100,000, but in the Eastern Wakefield primary care trust, which is my patch, it is 1,130 per 100,000. The standardised years of life lost—that is, the years of life that one might expect to have—is 649 for every 10,000 people in England, compared with 819 for every 10,000 in the Eastern Wakefield PCT. In England, the mortality rate from potentially avoidable causes of death, which includes cardiovascular problems, is 100, but in the Eastern Wakefield PCT it is 132—33 per cent. more.

Unless one argued that people in Hemsworth have a genetic propensity to suffer from cardiovascular and other such problems—I am sure that nobody would argue that—one must assume that the causes of those inequalities and differences in death rates, which are so marked in my constituency and which leave such bleak picture, are largely behavioural, although genetic factors play a significant part. Otherwise, the differences between communities would not be so marked. In my constituency there are even differences within communities according to socio-economic factors. It is clear that behaviour and social processes are at the root of much that is happening.

Two sets of behaviours should be addressed in relation to coronary heart disease and sickness generally. The first set is those behaviours that the Government can most directly influence, almost in a managerial way: the wide variety of medical and clinical services that the NHS provides. I particularly welcome the emphasis that the Government have put on that. Although the hon. Members for Northavon (Steve Webb) and for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) made excellent points, they lacked generosity. The spirit of opposition should not deny the ability generously to acknowledge the improvements being made. If one considers how the national service framework has been rolling out, one must accept that major differences are being made in constituencies such as mine and throughout the nation.

As one might expect from my comments, Eastern Wakefield PCT is one of the spearhead group of PCTs in the most deprived areas—in fact, we are among the most deprived anywhere in Europe. There has been a major reduction in waiting times: now nobody waits more than three months for heart surgery and by December nobody will wait more than three months for angiography. Two thirds of all patients now have to wait less than 60 minutes—the golden hour—between phone call and needle time. That is a remarkable achievement, and not acknowledging it shows a lack of generosity of spirit.

Dr. Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman tell me how the standardised morbidity rate has changed with time in his constituency?

Jon Trickett: I will try to address those issues. I am not quite sure that the SMR is necessarily an indicator of where we would have been had such activities not taken place, since the general trend across the whole of western Europe and all similar societies is heading upwards because of obesity and other such factors. I am not sure that SMR changes measure what would have happened otherwise.

Eastern Wakefield PCT has been seeing remarkable changes. We are now the highest prescriber of statins in West Yorkshire. Most important, there has been a 10 per cent. increase in the number of completed consultant episodes since 2000—I am not going back to 1997, which was the political watershed. In the past five years we have seen an increase from 5,000 completed consultant episodes in coronary heart disease to 5,500. Those remarkable achievements, which have to be welcomed, are the result of active political intervention to change the behaviour of the NHS.

Steve Webb: The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful contribution and I fully accept his point about saluting what has been achieved. However, looking ahead, does it not worry him that more people have coronary heart disease now than did five and 10 years ago? Surely the job of Opposition is not merely to say "Well done," but to say, "These are the problems: what is being done?"

Jon Trickett: That is precisely what I will go on to do: ask questions. There is an upward trajectory, not only in

[Jon Trickett]

this country but across the western world. I want to address behavioural factors and say where I think that the Government should do more or accelerate what they are doing. It is the duty of all Back Benchers, and not simply Opposition Back Benchers, to ask questions, but to do so in a spirit of generosity that acknowledges where achievements are being made.

To talk about behaviour and what can and cannot be changed, I have questions about the way in which provision is made to communities such as that which I represent and then go on to the behaviour of the general population. The local health service—I suspect that the issue goes wider than Hemsworth and Wakefield—is undergoing massive transformation. That transformation is in danger of undermining public confidence in the provider institutions, particularly the acute hospitals at Pinderfields and Pontefract. Several separate processes are going on in parallel, all of which are putting huge question marks over the kind of services provided. I will not go into them now, except to mention that the PFI arrangement is desperately needed. There is chronic underfunding: the Government are now increasing funding but it beggars belief that after eight years we have not done more to increase funding to such a sick population as that which I represent, and although we are moving faster, it will take some years to reach the point at which we ought to be. The local hospitals have inherited a financial deficit. In addition, there has been a major consultation process on the reconfiguration of services across the patch as a result of the merger of hospitals.

All that, together with the general reform agenda, is driving a clinician-led process of centralisation which, it is hoped, will produce centres of excellence at Pinderfields and elsewhere, but which is undermining confidence in provision at Pontefract, which serves most of the sick population that I represent. We urgently need stability in local hospital provision. It strikes me that, if we are not careful, that clinician-led process of centralisation that seems to be going on in my patch and across the country will undermine the sense of confidence, locality and community services that is equally important. I suspect that where confidence goes and a choice is offered, people will move to other hospitals—in my area into Doncaster, which the Minister may or may not welcome since she represents the Doncaster area, or Barnsley—at the expense of Pontefract hospital. If those processes are allowed to go on unmanaged, I fear for local coronary care. I know that Ministers are well aware of the problems, but if the Minister keeps her eye on Pontefract and Pinderfields hospitals, I shall be grateful.

The Minister could have made more of issues of behaviour. To return to genetics, behaviour and the social processes that produce ill health and are so manifest in my constituency, it strikes me that, in four areas, rather than simply try to offer an expedited and accelerated curative set of processes, such as better clinical services, we ought equally to consider preventive measures.

The first such area is obvious: smoking. Smoking is a major factor in ill health, particularly in coronary problems. The Government are doing a lot and have a fantastic information scheme—a great deal of public information has been in the media, on TV and so on. There appears to be a downward trend in many social groups, although not all—the number of young women, for example, who are still smoking worries me. The Government are doing a good job, but they are being timid about the ban on smoking in public places. We ought to have none of it. Smoking in public places should be ended. There will be a huge debate and huge loopholes in the legislation if we say that pubs and other places can continue to allow smoking in areas where food is not being prepared. It seems to me that that is a huge loophole that ought to be carefully considered.

The second area is nutrition. The Government have introduced the five-a-day principle, which is excellent, and there has also been the recent debate about food in schools, but there is more to be done and I would welcome any comments from the Minister.

The third area is exercise. I might be living proof that it is possible, if one exercises, to maintain a healthy physiology in spite of all the problems of ageing and genetic inheritance. The Department has done a lot to encourage physical activity and our understanding of it, but there is more to be done. Local GPs seem to regard exercise referral schemes as a bureaucratic and difficult process. If an individual who presents at a doctor's surgery is manifestly moving towards obesity and might have a number of risk factors for coronary heart disease, the doctor is entitled to prescribe exercise. That is a welcome move from the Government, but GPs frequently lack confidence in the process. There is more to be done on the matter of physical exercise.

I said that there were four factors; I will come to the last in my winding-up comments. However, those three matters—nutrition, smoking and exercise—all touch on what has been described as health literacy. If we are to transform people from passive patients who receive cures when they are ill into active consumers, which is the Government's ambition, the idea of health literacy is a positive one. It has been described in one definition as

"the capacity of an individual to obtain, interpret and understand basic health information and services in ways which are health-enhancing."

That is a fantastic idea. More needs to be done to encourage the understanding of human physiology and what one can do to try to avoid ill health. Behavioural factors might be regarded as individual actions and the Government might not want to be seen as part of a nanny state—that might be the motivation for not pressing hard enough—but if people are to become actively engaged and health literate, more needs to be done. The Government might have to be prescriptive about smoking, nutrition and physical activity in order to produce a population that is health literate and capable of making the educated choices that the Government want people to make.

I have described the levels of ill health in my local area. The Office for National Statistics uses 32,000 statistical units to make its measurements, according to which South Kirkby—a ward of 12,000 or 13,000 adults—is in the 100 sickest wards in the country. One in two households in that ward has somebody who has a long-term, limiting illness of some kind. It is a profoundly ill population as a result of all kinds of problems, but when the ONS asked people in that sick population—as it did in every area—how they would describe their health, 85 per cent. said that it was good

or very good. That is remarkable given that they live in an area with among the worst levels of mortality and morbidity in the country and that many live with long-term, limiting illness. There is a disjunction between the objective perception of the medical profession or other observer of ill health in the area and people's subjective view. People conclude that they are not living such a bad life because they live in an ill community and think that they are not too badly off compared with their neighbours and peers in the community. They do not understand that compared with the middle-class population or communities in other parts of the country, such as rural areas, they suffer a major health disadvantage.

The statistics that I mention are repeated in every ward in my constituency—and, I dare say, in those of many other hon. Members. The Government's vision of a consumer-led, choice-driven agenda, which is probably benign, is some way away from being achieved if we have such low levels of health literacy in the areas with the highest levels of illness. Any long-term attack on coronary heart disease needs to factor in considerations such as public dissemination of information, the creation of a more actively engaged clinical work force and the slow-down of the kind of reform agenda that is being driven, to some extent, at the expense of locality.

Practitioners in my local primary care trust tell me that they are being set tough targets. They are working hard and I pay tribute to them for achieving those objectives, but the population is deeply scarred by health inequalities. The behaviour of individuals is only part of the problem; poverty and ill health are as strongly correlated as they could be, and the Government need to move faster and further to achieve our anti-poverty objectives. That is the clearest way of alleviating the problems that I describe. From the Conservative Administration, we inherited 14 million people living in poverty; we have taken 1.5 million out of poverty, and it is great to see children and old people targeted in that way, but that still leaves 12.5 million people living in poverty, including many in my patch, and suffering the twin problem of ill health. Nevertheless, I very much welcome the Minister's comments and the national service framework.

4.35 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton: This has been a fascinating debate, in which all hon. Members have made positive comments, although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) said, some of the comments by Opposition Members were a little mealy-mouthed.

I hoped that we could use this opportunity to praise everyone who has made such a difference in the delivery of coronary care services over the past five years. I am conscious that I did not spend as much time on what I think are some of the challenges, but I wanted to give all hon. Members the chance to speak and was aware that my speech was quite long. I hope that I touched on those issues, but I wanted to reply in my winding-up speech to matters that I knew would be raised during the debate and to expand on some comments.

Everybody has touched on health inequalities and prevention, particularly the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison), who raised the issue of obesity, as did the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb). That issue is relevant to the comments of the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) about local priorities and the tension that sometimes exists between national service frameworks and targets, and the taking of decisions at local level about local problems. That leads me to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth. That is the direction in which we are going, as one can see when one considers the issues set out in the White Paper, "Choosing Health: making healthier choices easier", and in other publications.

I have come fairly new—since the election—to issues such as coronary heart disease and coronary services, but many of the points raised today have been raised in relation to other areas for which I have responsibility, such as diabetes. There is a need to work with people to change their lifestyles and to make it easier for them to choose healthier options. Vital to that is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth about health literacy. In many other areas, we have very good expert patient programmes, in which we talk to people about how they can use their experiences of a condition to help others to manage the same condition. The hon. Member for Westbury talked about GPs and whether more could be done. I think that it could—through the GP contract and GP specialisms, and through working with practice nurses to expand the availability of information.

I return to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth. I know that he will be particularly interested in this point, because of his experience in local government. The relationship between health services, primary care trusts and local government is vital in bringing together the components to build on Sure Start, for example. We must look at how, through schools, we can help to educate people about healthy eating and at how we can use schools as community facilities for increasing participation in sport. We will certainly take that on board and consider whether it is too bureaucratic for GPs to prescribe exercise.

My hon. Friend's constituency contains a spearhead authority. The hon. Member for Westbury talked about the rural poor and how to learn some of the lessons. The idea is that the spearhead authorities consider how to innovate and pass those lessons on to other areas.

I should like to draw hon. Members' attention to some of the local innovation forums that are working jointly with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and looking at how public health issues can be taken forward, even through the joint pooling of health authority and local government budgets. That is part of the agenda to decide local priorities and to consider where the inequalities are.

The hon. Member for Northavon mentioned inequalities, which have narrowed but not enough, which is why we need to consider many issues as we take this work forward. That is the next stage for the national service framework, but it is part of a much wider agenda.

I am anxious to ensure that we do not consider coronary heart disease, cancer and diabetes separately. The same factors apply in many cases. Obesity, for example, leads to an increased risk of cancer and diabetes. Some good things have been done for people

[Ms Rosie Winterton]

from ethnic minorities with diabetes and we need to translate that into what we do for coronary heart disease.

We need to increase rehabilitation, as the Healthcare Commission said. However, it is important that we link that with other programmes. It should be possible, as we develop services, to say, "If this is the agenda and we are looking at health literacy, somebody should come out with information, having had coronary heart disease treatment, and let's make sure that similar information is provided to people who have had treatment for cancer or diabetes." There should be a way to ensure that we do not work in condition silos or agency silos—I refer to the contribution that local government and health care trusts make to increasing information on prevention services, rehabilitation services and so on. That is an important agenda.

I turn to some of the points that were made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) in an eloquent speech about what has been happening to families in his constituency. He has obviously been pursuing some of the issues that have been raised. He talked about what more we can do to raise awareness. We need to take that forward. I should be interested in pursuing that issue with him and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), together with people from Cardiac Risk in the Young, to see what else we can do. Of course, screening families is a quality requirement in the new chapter.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest raised the issue of screenings for sport. The expert group that examined the new chapter considered that issue and whether there was sufficient evidence to allow us to say whether participation in sport might be a contributory factor to a higher risk of death. It was felt that there is not enough evidence at the moment, but obviously we will keep that under review. Both the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South—she had to leave, but I congratulate her again on the work that she has done—mentioned the issue of research, which we will continue to keep under review in view of the new chapter.

As for the number of physiologists and other specialist workers, I hope that it will assure hon. Members to know that we are in discussion with the professional bodies to speed up specialisation in cardiology, so that that speciality grows first, before numbers increase. We are looking into working with professional bodies to consider the new ways of working that I mentioned earlier, and to consider how we can spread good practice to other areas; hon. Members have highlighted many examples of good practice this afternoon. We must ask how we can ensure that we look at what works best in certain areas and translate it to others.

A number of points were raised and I think that I have addressed most of them, but if there are any that I have not, I will certainly write to hon. Members. Perhaps we have previously concentrated on acute and in-house or in-hospital services, but today we have tried to touch on how to ensure that we take the issue out to the community. That is the next and biggest step that we need to take. I am very confident that, given how we are taking forward the agenda—not only on this subject, but in a wider sense—we can make a real contribution to that. The progress report published in March is encouraging, and that is a great tribute to everyone who has worked in the services involved.

There is real open-mindedness about how to change ways of working and how to consider innovation, and it is important that we encourage that. We must be careful not to depress people or to be mealy-mouthed about the issue. We need to give encouragement and to show that the Government are on people's side in taking forward the agenda. Today's debate has shown that. There is more to do, but we are well on the way to doing it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eleven minutes to Five o'clock.